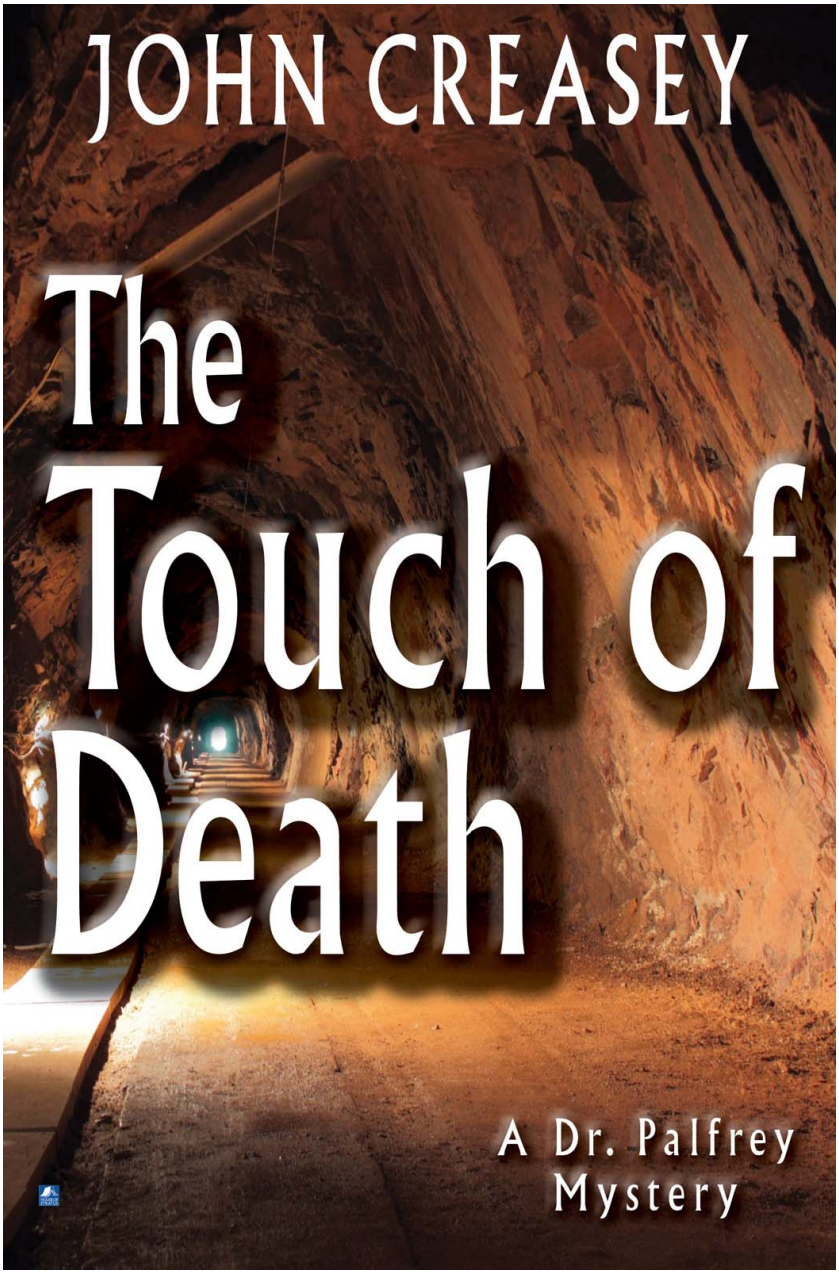

JOHN CREASEY
The Touch of Death
A Dr. Palfrey Mystery

Copyright & Information

The Touch Of Death

First published in 1954
© John Creasey Literary Management Ltd.; House of Stratus 1954-2014

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise), without the prior permission of the publisher. Any person who does any unauthorised act in relation to this publication may be liable to criminal prosecution and civil claims for damages.

The right of John Creasey to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted.

This edition published in 2014 by House of Stratus, an imprint of Stratus Books Ltd., Lisandra House, Fore Street, Looe, Cornwall, PL13 1AD, UK.

Typeset by House of Stratus.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library and the Library of Congress.

This is a fictional work and all characters are drawn from the author's imagination.
Any resemblance or similarities to persons either living or dead are entirely coincidental.

www.houseofstratus.com

About the Author

John Creasey – Master Storyteller - was born in Surrey, England in 1908 into a poor family in which there were nine children, John Creasey grew up to be a true master story teller and international sensation. His more than 600 crime, mystery and thriller titles have now sold 80 million copies in 25 languages. These include many popular series such as *Gideon of Scotland Yard, The Toff, Dr Palfrey and The Baron*.

Creasey wrote under many pseudonyms, explaining that booksellers had complained he totally dominated the 'C' section in stores. They included:

> *Gordon Ashe, M E Cooke, Norman Deane, Robert Caine Frazer, Patrick Gill, Michael Halliday, Charles Hogarth, Brian Hope, Colin Hughes, Kyle Hunt, Abel Mann, Peter Manton, J J Marric, Richard Martin, Rodney Mattheson, Anthony Morton and Jeremy York.*

Never one to sit still, Creasey had a strong social conscience, and stood for Parliament several times, along with founding the *One Party Alliance* which promoted the idea of government by a coalition of the best minds from across the political spectrum.

He also founded the *British Crime Writers' Association*, which to this day celebrates outstanding crime writing. *The Mystery Writers of America* bestowed upon him the *Edgar Award* for best novel and then in 1969 the ultimate *Grand Master Award*. John Creasey's stories are as compelling today as ever.

BOOK ONE

Chapter 1

It was three weeks since he had seen Rita, and Banister – one "n" – was afraid, deep in his heart, that they would never be able to patch things up. That hurt. Yet sitting at the bar with a whisky-and-soda, or lounging back in his armchair with a whisky-and-soda, or saying "just a splash" at the club, he knew that he couldn't blame Rita. It wasn't exactly his fault either. Marriages had crashed on incompatibility often enough; he ought to be glad that they had gone no farther than an engagement.

He wasn't glad; he was miserable.

Rita wanted a life of her own, of course. She was always dashing off here or there by air – New York, Paris, Rome; it was difficult to keep track of her. That had begun the trouble; that, and the fact that she was so vague about her work – secretary to a Mr. Menzies, whom Banister had never seen.

Of course he, Neil Banister, had been unreasonable, issuing a kind of ultimatum: "Marry and settle down, or . . ." Rita had rejected it; very gently. He felt that it had hurt her; and feared that it had robbed him of his last chance. So he was miserable.

Yet at thirty-five, he had much to be content about, if not actively happy. On the evening of the twenty-second day after he had last seen Rita – he had started a new calendar from that epochal incident – he sat alone in the large chair in the living-room of his comfortable Mayfair flat, and decided to count his blessings. He did this simply because of the possibility that it would cheer him up. Nothing else would. Whisky was failing, and it was dawning on him that he was drinking too much. Work failed, too; but then, he wasn't very interested in his work. He much preferred to drive or tinker with cars than to sell them, but sell them he did, for his living.

True, a legacy from his father gave him a small private income which enabled him to live very comfortably, way above the level that a car salesman even in the heart of London could normally hope for. That, he decided, was Blessing Number 1.

Number 2? Health. Toughness. Physical strength, which he was wasting on golf and tennis.

Number 3? A satisfactory past. If he cared to pull out a drawer in the desk which was just within reach, he could gaze upon the D.S.O. and bar, and the M.C. and bar, and their pretty ribbons. At one time he had almost begun to believe that he was a most remarkable young man.

Number 4 – also in the past? He had travelled a great deal, largely because chances had come his way. His first post-war job had been with a firm then pushing its exports, and Banister had made several hurried trips round in those days when one had only to open a sample case to cause a fight. Jobs which took one abroad had become few and far between – unless

one was ready to stay abroad, a thing Banister had no desire to do.

"*Damn* Rita!" he said explosively.

He jumped up. By chance, he caught sight of himself in the mirror over the mantelpiece above a built-in electric fire. The face itself wasn't bad at all, with a full, friendly mouth and a slightly snub nose, good grey eyes, quite a chin, rather curly brown hair.

Turning, he knocked against a table, and the whisky bottle began to rock. He grabbed but didn't touch it. He watched with a severe expression as it settled down, beginning noisily, and ending silent and still. It was three parts empty.

"You must look after yourself for the rest of the evening," he said firmly. "I'm going to the pictures. I might have a nightcap when I get back. *Au revoir*."

That was a conquest over the bottle. It had a momentary exhilarating effect.

He went out into the chill of a February night. It was quiet here, too. Mayfair was divided, roughly speaking, into graceful and quiet squares, graceful and quiet streets, ugly and quiet cul-de-sacs once stable-yards, now garages with flats above where the not-so-rich lived, and villages. There were villages in Mayfair, and no one except natives realised it. Five minutes' walk from his flat at Wickham Mews, for instance, there was a little colony of shops, barber, baker, greengrocer, doctor's surgery, a gunsmith's, a cobbler, a newsagent and tobacconist – a little bit of everything. On the right night and in the right mood, this could be almost sinister. In fact, it was a kind of imitation Soho.

It was much darker than usual in Wickham Mews, because the light which always burned on the wall of a building at the corner was out. There were no stars. The nearest lamp was a hundred yards away – and the nearest houses were as far. This was a backwater of garages and storerooms, deserted by night, busy by day. A soft, whistling wind came round the corner, and made Banister shiver. The wind seemed to carry a peculiar touch of eeriness, which he put down to his mood. He threw it off, turned the corner, kicked against the body, and pitched forward.

He did not know that it was a body, only that he kicked against something soft, without expecting it, and it tripped him up. Instinctively, he turned his left shoulder towards the pavement; the fall jarred him, and hurt. He stayed where he was long enough to recover from the worst of the shock.

He could see a shape on the pavement.

He took out his lighter, knelt down, and flicked it. The flame seemed bright as it shone on dark clothes and a grey head. Well, most of the head was grey, but there was a red patch, a very bright red patch which shone and looked sticky, on one side.

Banister felt sick.

He shifted his position. The light was beginning to fade, but not before he found the pulse of the grey-haired man – or the place where the pulse should have been. *Was* there a beat? He couldn't be sure.

He heard a rustle of movement from nearby. It was soft, slow, furtive. It was the kind of movement one might hear, tense and expectant, in a Jap-invested jungle. It had the same effect on Banister, sent a tingling feeling up and down his spine. He turned. There was not even a faint glow of light to show a silhouette.

He straightened up, and switched the lighter from one hand to the other; now his left hand was free. A long way off, he heard the sound of a car engine. There were other sounds, also far off, of traffic – but only the furtive sounds here.

Yes, there was more than one man approaching. Now he was aware of something creeping towards him from the other direction. His eyes told him nothing, but he could rely on his ears. He stood over the man whose grey hair had been hideously reddened with blood from an ugly wound, while an unseen man approached from the right and another from the left; he had the wall behind him.

He said: "Do we want a fight?"

No one answered, but he knew that both of them stopped. He could shout, but not be sure that anyone would hear him. A shout would betray his taut nerves, too. He had to face this out alone.

He heard the rustle, it seemed that the man from his right was jumping. He shot out his foot; the man kicked against it, and Banister heard the retching sound, a mingling of pain and wind.

A hand brushed his face, both cold and clammy; then the man drew back.

There was a pause, then another swift, deadly rush. Banister struck again, and landed on a face. Next moment he heard a different sound, as of metal hitting the ground.

A knife?

Banister spun round as an assailant came at him, but hadn't time to thrust out his foot. He swerved to one side. He felt a sharp pain at his forearm, the kind of pain that came from a cut. That made him viciously angry. He hooked the other man's legs from under him, and heard him crash down. He didn't hear a second knife fall, so that man might still have one – but he might be hurt, too.

They hadn't finished what they wanted to do with the old man, or they wouldn't have been lurking there. He had interrupted them. Alone, he would probably reach safety, but could he leave the man – who might not be dead?

He heard one of the men getting to his feet.

The beam of a torch shot out, snaked against the wall, and then fell on the grey hair and the glistening red – and on the face. Banister saw every feature, every line of the old face in a swift, vivid glimpse. Then the light went out, on a word which Banister heard but did not understand.

He was by the old man's side.

He bent down, and lifted him; after the first tug, it was easy, the old man was very light. He couldn't help what harm he might do to the broken head. He straightened up with the old man in his arms and ran towards the

nearest street. The corner of it was fifty yards away; once at the corner he would have light – and help would be near. He gasped for breath, and there were noises in his ears, but there were other sounds, too – the footsteps of running men behind him.

The corner was only ten yards away.

A glow of light came faintly from the street beyond.

The men were gaining on him.

He felt another sharp, swift pain, then a thud against his right shoulder. The blow was so heavy that it almost sent him off his balance again. He recovered, and went on, gasping, almost breathless. The pain in his shoulder was worse; a weight seemed to be hanging there. Was a knife sticking in him?

Both men probably had knives . . .

The corner and the blessed light were only three yards away.

As Banister neared it, he saw a shadow. It was enormous, thrown by someone or something standing at the corner. Banister reached it. The shadow took on substance. In that frightening moment, it seemed to Banister that he was almost running into the largest man he had ever seen in his life – a giant so huge that he was grotesque.

He heard the giant exclaim in language that wasn't English. Then the man swerved out of Banister's way, and at the same time shouted: "Be careful! Careful, he's carrying Monk—G."

The warning was in English; *warning.*

Light shone out and struck at Banister's eyes, and dazzled him. He heard sounds in front of and behind him. He had a strange impression – of being surrounded by men who were afraid of him.

He grunted; groaned; and fell. The old man pitched forward out of his grasp. Banister saw a flash – so bright, so vivid, that even as his senses reeled, it frightened him.

He heard a cry – of pain, of fear; an awful cry.

Then he lost consciousness.

When Banister came round, it was daylight. At first he knew that there was something wrong with him, but wasn't sure what it was. His shoulder and arm were stiff, and his head ached a little, but that was all. He was in his own bed. This was his room. Lying in the corner, as he was, he could see the grey slate of the corner of the roof of the house opposite, a piece of the guttering and a couple of sparrows having a sparring match on the guttering.

Who had brought him here?

The police?

He might have expected them to take him to a hospital or a nursing home. He could hardly expect the police to bring him to his own flat, to take his keys from his pocket, force their way in, dress his wounds and lay him in his own bed. It had an eerie touch, like the quiet darkness of the night before.

He heard a sound; a sharp, faint tapping. It puzzled him for a moment, being so very light. Then he realised what it was; someone typing.

He had no typewriter.

He pushed the bedclothes back. He had to move gingerly, because his shoulder hurt rather badly, but his head didn't swim. The room was comfortably warm. He sat on the side of the bed, listening. Whoever it was typed at furious speed.

He stood up, put on a dressing-gown awkwardly, and walked slowly towards the door.

One or two things had been moved. The small armchair was in front of the window, for instance, instead of in a corner. His wooden tea-trolley now held bandages and dressings, scissors, odds and ends of first-aid as well as a thermometer and a phial of tablets – *and* a hypodermic syringe.

He reached the door, and the typing stopped.

This room opened into a narrow passage. Next to it was the bathroom, opposite the kitchenette; at the far end the front door and the door of the living-room, which was large and comfortably furnished. That was the room where he had been when he had decided to stop drinking to drown his sorrows.

This was the first time since coming round that he had thought of Rita, and it didn't hurt.

The typing started up again. Whoever it was must be sitting at his desk, with the door open, or the sound wouldn't travel so clearly. He turned the handle, opened the door and stepped into the passage. Yes, the door was open, and the furious typing had a kind of breathless haste.

He reached the door of the living-room.

His desk was in the far corner. The girl who sat there was facing this door, so that she could see when it opened – if she took the trouble to look up. She had a round face, very fair skin, yellow hair and an air of tremendous concentration – if her life depended on it, she couldn't have typed any faster. The machine clanged and rattled.

Banister stood and watched, glad to lean against the door.

It would have been difficult, if not impossible, to think of a greater contrast between her and Rita. Rita was small, dark and with a rather narrow face, beautiful features which were almost aquiline. This girl's features were on the broad side, she wasn't exactly beautiful, she was—

She looked up.

Her large eyes were bright blue. She checked the speed of typing for a moment, but went on until she had finished the page. Then she snatched it out of the machine, and stood up.

"Good-morning, Mr. Banister," she said briskly. "You ought not to be up. Please sit down a moment."

She moved towards him and took his arm. She was rather tall for a woman, and he was two inches over six feet. Calmly, she helped him towards and into his own armchair. Then she went back to the desk.

Banister said: "If you start typing again, I'll scream."

She didn't smile; that was, she didn't smile with her lips, which were very full but not very red. She hadn't any lipstick on, and he didn't think that she had any rouge on, either. The gleam in her eyes might have been meant for a smile.

"I won't for a little while."

"What are you doing here?"

"Typing reports."

"For whom?"

"My boss."

"Who is he?"

"He'll be here soon," she said, "or he'll send someone who can talk to you. I'm afraid that I can't tell you very much. I'm only here because I happen to be a nurse as well as a typist, and we needed someone to look after you."

"Thoughtful of you," Banister said. "What time did you get here?"

"At three o'clock on the morning of February sixteenth," she said, and the gleam showed in her eyes again. "It's the seventeenth now."

She stood up again, and picked up a box of cigarettes, brought them to him. "Would you like to smoke? Can I get you anything?"

He took a cigarette, and she lit it for him – striking the match in the rather awkward way that non-smokers have.

"Of course, you *must* be hungry. I'll get—"

She broke off, jumped up and passed him on the way to the door. He had the odd feeling that he was doing the wrong thing, but couldn't stop himself. He shot out his left hand, and gripped her wrist. The jar against his shoulder was more severe than he had bargained for; but he held on.

The girl stopped, and looked down at him. Her eyes were enormous, but not at all frightened.

"What's all this about?" he demanded roughly.

"Honestly," she said, "I can't tell you. I'm just here to look after you. You're hurting."

He let her go.

"You ought to go back to bed," she said.

He knew that she was right, but his mood of sweet reason had changed, it wouldn't take much to make him furious. Would anger do any good? He was sure that it wouldn't.

He had finished the cigarette and was smoking another when the girl came back, with a tray, scrambled eggs, toast and butter. She put these on a convenient table by his side. Then she went back to the chair at the desk, but didn't touch the typewriter. Instead, she pushed it aside and began to read what she had been typing; now and again she made a correction in pencil. She didn't frown; there was no expression on her face at all, she looked placid – bland? He decided that placid was the right word.

The front-door bell rang. She put her pencil down and jumped up. He should have realised it before, but he hadn't – she had quite a figure, and her green woollen dress clung to it.

“I expect this will be the boss,” she said.

Banister watched her go into the passage, and his heart began to thump. The “boss” must be quite someone.

He heard the girl open the door.

“Oh,” she said. “Hallo.”

There was a moment’s pause before an old man spoke; or at least, a man with a rather quavering, gentle voice which Banister associated with age.

“Is Mr. Banister in, my dear?”

The “my dear” sounded quite impersonal.

“Well, he is,” the girl said, “but I’m not sure whether he ought to see anyone.”

“Oh, he’ll see *me*,” came the quavering voice, yet Banister didn’t recognise it, felt sure that he had never heard it before. He turned his head so that he could see the doorway, as the girl said slowly: “Well, all right. Will you come this way?” She appeared at the doorway, first; then the man arrived. Banister stared at him as if he could not believe his eyes. It was the man whom he had kicked and fallen over, the man with the sticky red wound at the side of his grey head.

This man had the same face, but no bandage, no sticking-plaster, no sign of a wound.

He came in, with his right hand outstretched in greeting.

Chapter 2

"My dear Neil," greeted the old man, "how good to see you again! I *am* sorry that you had that nasty accident, but I'm told that you're on the mend. Excellent, excellent!"

He spoke rather slowly, and his hand stayed close to Banister, who didn't touch it. The man was sixty or more, with a pink complexion, yet a hardy look. He wasn't bad looking, although he had never been a Greek god. His silvery grey hair was wiry, with a tendency to curl; his grey eyes were very clear.

He lowered his hand.

"I don't know what all this is about," Banister said. "But I'm not going to play."

"*Play*, Neil?"

"That's right – play. The game, your way, I mean." Banister groped for the box of cigarettes, lit another, and drew in the smoke before letting it trickle through his nostrils. "I don't know you from Adam. I thought—"

He broke off.

"What *did* you think?"

"Forget it."

"But Neil—"

"Nurse," said Banister to the girl, "I'm going back to bed."

He started to get up.

He couldn't put any weight on his left shoulder, and there wasn't much strength in his legs. The girl hurried forward and helped him, capably, while the old man looked on. He didn't seem abashed – just interested. He was very erect for a man of his age.

Banister glowered.

The girl helped him back into the bedroom, pushed back the clothes, smoothed the pillows, and then helped him into bed.

"I'll get you a glass of warm milk," the girl said. "I won't be a minute."

"Who's that man?"

She didn't answer, but disappeared.

Banister heard no other sound; no voices; no opening or closing doors. The old man might have left the flat, or might still be in the living-room. Banister was quite sure that it was the man he had "rescued"; at least, the same *face*. That had shown so vividly in that light, but – where was the wound? It had been a real one, the glistening red had been fresh blood. He could remember the unpleasant feel of it between his fingers. So it wasn't the same man, it was just the same face.

The girl came back, with a glass of warm milk.

"I don't know that I want it," Banister growled.

"You do, really," she said, as if talking to a fractious child. "And the boss shouldn't be long, now. Drink this up and rest for a little while. Then—"

He drank it.

Ten minutes later, he knew that it had been drugged, knew that he was falling asleep and that there was nothing he could do to keep himself awake.

It was dark.

Banister woke, and realised that it was night-time. He could see a faint glow, at the window, and the light of stars beyond. He was lying in exactly the same place, but something was different.

His shoulder and arm still felt stiff, but his head didn't ache as it had during the day. His head and his thoughts were quite clear – or they would have been, but for the difference at the window.

There were bars across it; two upright, three horizontal.

He got out of bed, and it was like repeating something that he had done before. He half-expected to hear the typewriter, but didn't. His legs were rather better than he had expected, but he swayed for several seconds, and didn't move away until he felt steady. Then he approached the window, opened it, and touched the bars. They were of iron or steel, and cold to the touch. They were set in cement, which looked hard, although it was new. The glass was beyond the bars.

He went to the door and switched on the light.

The suspicion which had crossed his mind, that this wasn't his room at all, faded at once. This was his bedroom at Flat 3, Wickham Mews, Mayfair, London, W.1.

He went back to the door, and tried to open it, but it was locked.

He actually clenched his left fist, ready to bang wildly on the door; but he didn't. He backed away. Anger surged again, and this time he couldn't keep it back. He grabbed a long-handled brush and smashed at the window through the bars.

Nothing happened – except that he hurt his wrist. The glass was toughened, not ordinary window-glass. He grabbed an ash-tray, raised it to hurl at the door – but let it fall.

It was as if something were dragging him back from impetuous action, as if a voice were whispering: "*Take it easy, take it easy, losing your temper won't help*."

He was being *frightened*; it was a deliberate campaign to wear at his nerves.

He went to the door, pulled up a chair, and sat down. Then he tapped with the ash-tray. He would have liked to thump, but didn't; he just tapped slowly and steadily.

Nothing happened.

After five minutes Banister stopped because his left arm was aching. Then he grinned, tautly, got up and pulled the rocking-chair into position. He touched it with his right foot, and one of the posts at the back tapped against the door. He had only to give the chair an occasional push, and the tapping would go on.

After ten minutes it was beginning to get on his own nerves, but he didn't stop.

After fifteen, he heard footsteps outside; then the sound of metal on metal; then the turning of the door-handle. He sat facing the door as it opened. Light was on in the passage, but he didn't see whoever opened the door, at first. Then he realised that it was being pushed open by someone who was holding a long stick.

He remembered opening doors in that way, with a nerve-racked caution, when he had been fighting hand-to-hand and house-to-house in Normandy.

A man appeared.

He was short, lean, hard-faced. He had dark hair and a rather sallow skin, and very dark-blue eyes. Something about him, perhaps the cut of his clothes, suggested that he was an American. He looked up at Banister, scowling.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?"

The voice *was* American.

"I don't like being locked in," Banister said, quite calmly, "and I don't like my window being barred. Also, I want the bathroom, and I want some food."

He got up.

The American glowered at him, but didn't prevent him from going out.

In the bathroom Banister looked at his reflection – and was startled, although he shouldn't have been. The growth of brown stubble gave him a wild look; there were one or two grey streaks, that was all. His eyes looked tired, and the pupils were pinpoints.

In the passage, the American said: "You can eat, go and get it."

"Where?"

"Your bedroom."

"Listen, this is my—"

"I said go and get it," the American said.

He didn't sound at all friendly. He looked hostile. He was a fit man, and Banister wasn't.

Banister went back to the room, and the key was turned in the lock. By the side of his bed were two ham sandwiches and another glass of milk. It was better than nothing. He enjoyed the sandwiches, but hesitated before drinking the milk. He decided that even if it were doped, it wouldn't really do him any harm. He drank it.

This time, he didn't go to sleep.

He was still awake when dawn came slowly, and the stars gradually dimmed. There were no sounds in the flat, but traffic was starting up in garages nearby.

He heard the front-door bell ring twice, heard footsteps and men's voices, but no one came to his room. He knew that he wouldn't be able to last out for long – he would start throwing things unless he discovered what was happening.

Then the door opened carelessly; was just flung back. The American came in. A big man was with him – and "big" wasn't the right word. His size was so great that Banister's resentment was stifled. He could only stare. This man

was a giant; huge of face, feature, body, hands. Banister had never seen a larger man – and then realised that he'd seen the very man before on the night of the nightmare.

The giant was quite expressionless.

He moved to a corner and sat down, dwarfing the chair.

The American slammed the door, then took an envelope from his pocket. It contained several photographs. Banister couldn't see them clearly because they were upside down.

The American handed him one, without a word.

He didn't speak.

Banister looked at the face of a man he didn't know; a small, thin face with huge eyes. He suspected that it was an Indian or a half-breed. He didn't say a word, but felt the probing gaze of the American and the giant.

He was shown five more pictures, all of them of men, all of them unknown to him. He handed each back.

The next picture was of a girl.

He stared at her, because in a way she was like Rita. She had Rita's cast of face, although there was no great likeness. She had big eyes, too, and she was a beauty – a real beauty; even in the black-and-white photograph that showed clearly. In the flesh, she must be superb.

"Who is she?" the American asked sharply.

"I've never seen her before."

"That's a lie."

Anger flared up, but Banister fought it down.

He said: "In a drawer in my desk you'll find some photographs of a girl rather like this one. That's my—was my fiancée. I've never seen this girl."

The American thrust another picture at him.

"You've seen *him*," he said, brutally.

It was the old man – and yet it wasn't the old man. This time, it was a profile, and one side of the grey head showed an ugly wound; blood which had trickled down to the collar and the corner of the mouth. The eyes were partly open, the lips slack. This was the face he had seen in the torch-light; and that was a real wound.

"Yes, I—"

The American thrust out a hand, gripped his pyjama jacket, and snapped: "You killed him."

"Don't be a fool!"

"You killed him. Why?" The grip was very tight, the dark-blue eyes were glittering, the accusation burned in them and in the man's manner, as well as in his words. "Come on, let's have the truth, Banister. You killed him. *Why?*"

"He was dead when I saw him, I—"

"You *killed* him."

"You're crazy!"

"I tell you—"

"Mr. Banister," said the giant gently, "it won't help to deny it, we know

that you killed him."

Banister turned his head to look at the man. The voice was low-pitched, the English excellent but with an unmistakable accent which Banister couldn't place. He was still expressionless, yet his voice had a note of finality.

"I found him . . ."

"Stop stalling," the American growled. "You killed him. Why? Who paid you?"

"We know you did it," murmured the giant. That was the man and the voice to fear. "Just tell us why. It will be much better for you."

"I didn't kill him."

But a new element frightened Banister; he couldn't guess what made them accuse him, couldn't guess what they wanted – unless it was a confession.

The small man was an American.

The giant wasn't English.

Who were they? What was all this?

The door opened, and the girl came in. She looked rather sweet, with her braided yellow hair and her milky complexion and very blue eyes; somehow, she didn't look English, although he remembered that her accent had been flawless.

She closed the door.

"Mr. Banister," she said with anguish in her voice, "I don't want you to be hurt. You killed the Professor, and we know that. Don't *force* them to hurt you. Why did you kill him?"

Banister said slowly: "I was going to see a film. I went out. The lamp at the corner was out. I couldn't see anything. I turned the corner, and fell over a body. It was the old man's. Then I was attacked by two men with knives. You should know that I've knife wounds. I picked up the old man, and ran —"

"Lies!" snapped the American. "You killed him. Stefan, we'd better get busy."

"No!" the girl exclaimed. "No, don't, I hate—"

"You don't have to stay," the American said, and the words made a sneer. "Just go out for a nice long walk, honey, and when you come back—"

She moved forward, gripped Banister's left hand, and squeezed it. She bent down, peered into his face. Her eyes were enormous; china blue.

"Don't make them," she begged, "don't!"

"I—" began the giant.

A sharp crack made all of them look round at him. He was standing up, and the chair he had been sitting on was in his hands. One of the legs was broken. It was an oak chair, made in the days when wood wasn't at a premium, and it had snapped in two. The giant didn't smile, just shifted his grip to another leg. He hardly seemed to exert any pressure – and it cracked with a report as loud as a pistol shot.

He dropped the chair and the pieces.

“Let us give him an hour to change his mind,” he said, and went out of the room.

The American hesitated, then followed. The girl stayed behind, but didn’t look happy. She drew near Banister again, and squeezed his hand tightly.

“Tell them the truth,” she begged, “don’t let them hurt you. I’ve seen—”

She caught her breath, and turned abruptly, then went out. The door slammed. A moment later, Banister heard the key turn in the lock.

Chapter 3

Banister lay sweating on the pillow.

The flat was silent; since the turning of the key in the lock, he hadn't heard a sound. He had been here for nearly two hours. For the past sixty minutes he had been watching the door, expecting it to open; and expecting to hear footsteps.

Nothing had happened.

In his mind's eye he could see the faces of the two men, and of the girl. Her plea and their voices seemed to ring in his ears; so did the crack of the breaking chair-legs. The casual, careless strength of a man who could do that was a fearful thing. He could crush the life out of anyone.

There was no sound anywhere.

Banister got up, and went unsteadily to the door. He turned the handle and pushed – and the door opened.

He looked at it stupidly. He was sure that he had heard the key turn; yes, he had tried to open it before. They had unlocked it, and he hadn't heard a sound.

The passage was empty. He stepped into it.

There was the front door – two yards away. He could reach it in three easy strides, get outside and be free of danger.

The room doors were open.

He crept forward, until he reached the front door, and glanced into the living-room. The typewriter was gone from the desk. The room was empty. The whole flat seemed empty. He felt dazed, bewildered, foolish. He could get out without any difficulty, but – need he? What were they trying to do to him? Just break his nerve? Or make him think that he was going crazy?

Slowly, forcing himself, he went into each room; and the flat was empty. There was no trace, that he could see, of anyone else – except a faint smell of cigar smoke; he didn't smoke cigars.

He felt weak, and still foolish. His shoulder ached rather than hurt. So did his arm where he had first been wounded. He dropped into the large armchair in the living-room – and then he got up hurriedly, went into the bedroom and looked for the broken chair.

It wasn't there.

Banister came back and stared stupidly at the telephone for several minutes, then lifted it and dialled O.

"Can I help you?" the operator asked.

"I—" He paused again. "I'm sorry. Can you—can you tell me what date it is?"

"February 20th," said the operator briskly. "Are you having any difficulty with your telephone, sir?"

"What? Er—no. No, I—"

"What number are you trying to get?"

"Number?" Banister caught his breath, realised that he sounded as if he

were out of his wits. “Sorry again. But get me Scotland Yard, will you—in a hurry.”

He knew the name of Superintendent Gillick of New Scotland Yard. Gillick was one of the Big Five, perhaps better known to the general public than any other member of the Criminal Investigation Department. At first it didn’t appear odd to Banister that such a celebrity should come to see him. Even the big shots had to handle small affairs, or those which looked unpromising at the beginning.

Gillick was big and portly and gave the impression of being unimaginative. But his comments and questions were shrewd; Banister didn’t run away with the idea that he was a fool. Gillick listened to Banister’s statement with hardly any outward sign of surprise, had him describe the men and the blonde girl – whose name he had never heard – and wanted a particularly careful description of the grey-haired man.

Banister did his best.

Gillick had brought a police-surgeon with him, and the wounds were examined. The cut in the arm wasn’t serious, but the stab in the shoulder needed much more dressing and attention.

“You’d better go to hospital with that,” said the police-surgeon. “As an out-patient, of course. Only satisfactory way of dealing with it.”

“We’ll give you a chit,” Gillick said in his rumbling voice. “Save you hanging about too much. Draughty places, hospitals. Now, let’s go back to the night you ran into this queer business . . .”

That was the moment when Banister first realised that Gillick didn’t believe him; or pretended not to. It was nothing that Gillick actually said – except by implication. It was in his manner, his eyes, his hands. “Yes, yes, I see,” he would say, with a kind of controlled impatience. Yet he wanted to know every detail, even asked the colour of the eyes of the people and what their teeth were like. It was almost as if he were trying to catch Banister out, for he asked the same questions time and time again, sometimes with two days in between.

“Let me see, now, this blonde girl—platinum blonde hair, didn’t you say?”

“Yellow.”

“Oh, yes, sorry. What colour were her eyes?”

“Big, blue eyes.”

“And the big fellow—” Gillick had a funny little smile, a

“I know it’s not really amusing but let’s pretend it is then we’ll get along” kind of smile. He gave it then. “And the big fellow, the larger-than-life chap?”

“Brown eyes.”

“Sure?”

“I am quite sure,” Banister said stiffly.

The sergeant who was with them all the time, whenever they met – and for the next three days they met seven or eight times – made his shorthand

notes industriously. Each day, a typewritten sheet was brought to Banister, for him to read and sign. Everything was accurate. The feeling that he wasn't believed not only remained but became stronger. It gave him a curiously guilty kind of feeling.

There appeared to be a kind of conspiracy to disbelieve him.

On the evening of the third day Gillick telephoned.

"We'll do everything we can, Mr. Banister, and if we get any news at all, we'll let you know. Meanwhile I hope that shoulder goes along all right." The rumbling voice paused. "Good-night."

When he put the receiver down, Banister thought: "I shan't hear from him again."

He didn't.

This conspiracy of disbelief was real – and made everything else unreal. The world had become a place of fantasy. Nothing that had happened was credible or real but – it *had* happened. That crack, as the chair leg broke; that anguish in the blue eyes of the blonde girl; the swift pattering of the keys of the typewriter; the "Why, Neil," of the old man, as if he were speaking with hurt protest.

The trouble was that Banister had no one to talk to about it.

He didn't go to the sales rooms for ten days, and when he did arrive, the manager was very friendly and amiable but regretful. Business wasn't so good, Banister would understand, wouldn't he, if he were suspended – only until business was better, of course.

That wasn't a disaster; but it wasn't pleasing.

The following day, Banister went to the hospital – the Westminster – for the last time. A capable nurse assured him that his shoulder would now be perfectly all right.

He left the hospital, walked towards the nearest paper boy, bought a newspaper – and stood stock still.

A man banged into him, and glared.

Banister hardly noticed him.

On the front page of the *Evening News* was a photograph of the Prime Minister with another man. A familiar man – a man with grey hair which had once been fouled with blood, and a face which Banister was sure he would remember until his dying day.

The caption beneath the photograph read:

> "The Prime Minister outside Number 10 Downing Street with Professor Monk-Gilbert, Britain's foremost nuclear scientist."

Banister had seen a man with Monk-Gilbert's face – dead. He had also seen a man with his face alive, calling him Neil, pretending to be an old friend.

He folded the paper up and walked towards Piccadilly. He couldn't think clearly. Something was gravely wrong, but he couldn't put a name to it, and couldn't see that he could do a thing.

Then he thought of Paul Harris.

Harris, a war-years acquaintance, was a private inquiry agent with offices in Fleet Street. Once the thought came, Banister was astonished that he hadn't thought of going to him before.

Harris was tall, hatchet-thin, keen-eyed.

He listened intently.

"The way you put it, Neil, it's really something," he said. "I'll do everything I can – and don't start arguing already. I know you'll want a fist in it yourself! But let me look round, first. This colossus, now—"

Banister went home, excited at the prospect of getting somewhere at last. He probably wouldn't have troubled again but for the photograph of Monk-Gilbert. He waited up until midnight, but heard nothing and turned in. From eight o'clock next morning, he was on edge for the telephone bell to ring and Harris to promise news.

Harris rang up at half-past ten.

"Neil, old chap, I'm sorry, but I find I can't handle that little problem of yours. Awful lot of work in. If I were you, I'd drop it."

"Listen, Paul, you can't—"

"I'm having a dreadful morning," Harris said apologetically. It was the same attitude as Gillick's, but more obvious: he didn't *believe* this story. "We must have a drink soon. So long."

He rang off.

After a few minutes, Banister said aloud: "Gillick's warned him off. But *why?*"

That was the day when Banister first realised that he was being followed. He probably wouldn't have known it, if he hadn't been in such a foul temper. He could not understand why anyone should refuse to believe him. He was walking towards St. James's Park along a narrow street leading from Wickham Mews, when he remembered he needed his chequebook; his mood had made him forget it. He had turned round sharply. A man in a navy blue suit suddenly stopped, and pretended to be lighting a cigarette.

The man followed him.

Wherever Banister went, the fellow in navy blue went also. He was thin-faced, lantern-jawed, well-dressed, rather sleek-looking. In a way, a vague kind of way, he reminded Banister of the men of the photographs which the American had expected him to identify.

Banister returned to his flat, and looked out of the window.

The man in blue was there, lighting a cigarette.

By nightfall, the man had gone, but another was in his place. Banister went out, deliberately, to make sure. He also took a gun, an old Colt which he had had for years. He had no ammunition for it, but didn't think that would be necessary. He was quite fit again now. He walked briskly. At last he went up to the man and spoke.

"What the hell do you think you're playing at?"

"Eh?" asked the man. He was a plumpish, round-faced fellow, not at all

like the one in navy blue. “Free world.”

“Why are you following me about?”

“Following *you*?”

“You ruddy well know you are!”

“Dear chap,” said the plumpish man, “your error.”

His blandness was infuriating.

Everywhere he went, Banister was followed.

On buses, in taxis, in restaurants, at Twickenham for an International, on the way to several interviews for a new job – he didn’t get it – everywhere. It began to wear at his nerves. He had to talk to someone; had to confide.

If only Rita . . .

He began to think about Rita again, but not very deeply. He simply wanted a confidante. He couldn’t keep this story to himself much longer. But there was another thing he had to remember; he probably wouldn’t be believed. Now that he looked back at it, the whole business seemed crazy, fantastic; the kind of thing that he might have dreamed up.

He almost began to wonder whether it *had* happened.

He hadn’t even the broken pieces of the chair as evidence.

For a long time he had felt solitary and lonely. Sixty-five days “After Rita”, thirty-nine days after Gillick, he began to feel morose and worried about himself; *was* there something wrong with his mind? Whenever he felt like that, he took out the newspaper cutting of the Prime Minister and Professor Monk-Gilbert.

Monk-Gilbert, he knew, had flown to Australia.

But a man *like* Monk-Gilbert . . .

A day or two later a story in the *Evening News* jolted him. A man’s body had been found in an alley in the East End of London. No one had seen him go there, no one had seen him die, the doctors could not explain the cause of death, but one witness at the inquest, who lived close to the spot where the body had been found, said simply: “I didn’t hear anything, but I did see a flash.”

Banister remembered the flash he had seen before losing consciousness.

Other things worked on his mind during this same period. Probably because he knew about Monk-Gilbert, he became sensitive to any news about scientists. It was startling to find how many were in the news. Small paragraphs in the newspapers seemed to be repeated time and time again, such as:

> Well-known Scientist Dead *or*
> Scientist Disappears *or*
> Atom-Man to Emigrate

Because this puzzled him and he became so obsessed, he looked through the files of two London newspapers for the past year. At least fifty scientists had died; or disappeared; or left England. There were also seven references to men dying after mysterious flashes had been seen.

The possible significance of this wore on his nerves still more.

And everywhere he was followed.

He flung himself out of the flat on an evening at the end of March. The plumpish man followed him. He reached the Bini Club, where Rita and he had spent a lot of time. It was a night-club, but opened for luncheons and dinners; a genuine club with the usual stolid members and few hangers-on. A little betting was done illegally, there was known to be a room for *chemin de fer* but no one played for high stakes. It was "all right"; the police had never raided it.

He ordered a whisky-and-soda, and tossed it down.

He ordered another, and it went the same way.

He saw two or three other people at the bar, and a girl by herself. He knew her slightly. Her name was Pam something-or-other, not very exceptional – Brown, Jones, Robinson, that kind of name. She was a pleasant and pretty little thing, usually one of a crowd.

She came and sat beside him.

"You look as if you're going to make a night of it, Neil."

"That's me. Same again," he said to the bar-keeper.

"Why?"

"Masculine privilege."

"Rita still hurts?"

He looked at her levelly, and his voice was not amiable.

"As you so rightly say, Pamela, Rita still hurts. You perceive the bare surface of the tortured human soul. I don't wish to discuss Rita. Have a drink."

"Thank you, Neil." She ordered a gin-and-it. She really was rather pretty, and had a good figure – the kind of figure one only began to appreciate after a little while. She had rather nice brown eyes, too, and a pleasant voice.

They had dinner together three times in the next week. Pam began to make him feel more human. He was on the point of telling her what had happened, but she might not believe it, and he couldn't bear to be laughed at. There was an eeriness, a sense of mystery, a sense of expectancy – at times it was almost fear.

Pam rang up, ten days after they'd first met at the Bini Club.

"Neil, there's a little restaurant in Soho I'd love to go to, do you think you could make it one day this week? For dinner. *My* dinner!"

"No."

"Oh," Pam said, startled. "Why not?"

"*My* dinner."

"Very well, sir," she said with a mock quality of demureness, "a Victorian maid I will be, for once. When will it please your masterfulness?"

It was all very trite and light and flippant, but it had a warmth about it, too.

"Tonight."

"Call for me at seven," Pam said.

He called for her promptly. They had a drink at the Bini, another at the

tiny bar of the Soho restaurant, then dinner in a small room upstairs with three other couples, a perfect meal cooked by a French chef whose sauces were perfection. Everything was exactly right, and Pam was at her brightest. They laughed a lot. Banister wasn't drunk, not even slightly tipsy, but he was in a light-hearted mood.

He discovered that the room was empty. . . .

He kissed her – not for the first time, although more passionately than before. She laughed lightly, jumped up, and then walked *through* the wall.

That was how it looked to Banister. One moment Pam was in the room, walking straight towards the wall; next, she was going through it. Of course, a door which he hadn't noticed before had opened. Laughing, he hurried after her.

He went through the door, but Pam wasn't in the room beyond.

There were three men. One was the little American, the other the giant, the third a man whom Banister had never seen before.

Chapter 4

Banister stopped quite still. The door closed behind him, although he didn't notice it. Another door closed in a corner; he thought fleetingly that Pam had gone through there; and Pam had lured him here.

The American was sitting at a table; grinning. He looked as tough a nut as one would find anywhere. It was something in his manner as well as in his brown, weather-beaten face. His eyes looked like dark-blue enamel.

The giant wasn't smiling, but he looked amiable.

The third man was in the middle. He was in the middle according to size, too. Not particularly handsome, he was impressive looking, and would have been more so but for a rather weak chin. His fair hair curled a little and looked very thin and silky. His eyelids drooped, making him look lazy or perhaps tired. His mouth was well-shaped, and curved a little, as if he saw some obscure joke.

There was nothing sinister about him.

"Hallo," he said. "Sorry we've been so abrupt – and that isn't the first apology we owe you. Come and sit down, won't you – and try this brandy."

Banister went forward slowly. There was an empty chair. He sat down. The American said: "He'll do," quite mysteriously, and the giant smiled faintly. The man in the middle looked pleased.

"My name is Palfrey," he said. "Dr. Stanislaus Alexander Palfrey."

Banister realised that all of them were looking at him more closely; there was some tension in the air. It was because of the name – or rather, because of his expected reaction to it. He thought he had heard the name before, but couldn't think where.

"This is Cornelius Bruton," the man named Palfrey went on, after the tension relaxed.

"Hi, Neil," the American said.

"And this, Stefan Andromovitch," Palfrey added with a quick glance at the giant. "Late of Moscow."

The Russian's hand was offered. Banister took it. As he did so, he remembered the breaking chair legs. The Russian's grip was firm and powerful, but there was nothing to suggest the remarkable strength in the fingers and wrists – except their size.

"And where," asked Banister dryly, "is Professor Monk-Gilbert or his double?"

Palfrey's lips curved more noticeably in response. Bruton put a match to his cigar, which had gone out. Palfrey sniffed the bouquet of his brandy, without taking his eyes from Banister. Then he said: "Monk-Gilbert died. You stumbled over his body. He was killed by two men who attacked you – and whom we caught some weeks later. They refused to make any statement. We do not know much about them. They are British nationals, but we don't know who employed them, who paid them for their assassins' work. We want to find out."

He sniffed the bouquet again, casually.

His calm voice, the almost gentle way in which he spoke, made the words more vivid and the picture clearer.

Banister nodded and waited.

"You might have been involved," Palfrey went on. "It was possible that you were working with them, knew that we were close behind, and picked Monk-Gilbert up and came along, pretending to do a rescue act in order to insinuate yourself into our good graces. He was, after all, coming to Wickham Mews. We don't know why. We thought it might be to see you."

"It wasn't," Banister said.

"We know that, now. The man posing as Monk-Gilbert came to see you – and obviously you didn't recognise him. We showed you photographs of other people involved, and were satisfied that you didn't know them. We had to make absolutely sure of that – and also absolutely sure that you weren't involved with the murderers. At the same time, it was necessary for us to test your nerve, to take it to breaking point. We did that by a mixture of terrorism, threat, suspense and general wear-and-tear on the system; we made sure you couldn't rest, and studied your reactions. We started all that, then walked out – to see what you would do. The police took over. They gave a good account of you. Everyone has. Especially Pam. You've been middling tight when with her, but never talked of this. You did everything anyone could do to find out what was behind it, but didn't crack. I say this with diffidence," Palfrey went on with a deprecating smile. "But you have what it takes. Your nerves are *very* good. You have been watched day and night, and—"

"Don't I know it!"

"You haven't always known it. You got annoyed when you found out, but didn't do anything silly. You must have felt like drinking yourself under the table when Harris turned you down, after a word with Gillick. You didn't. There isn't much about you that we don't know." Palfrey took a fold of paper from his pocket and handed it to Banister. "You can look at that later. We know you've travelled a great deal and where you've been. We think you've all the qualifications that a job with us would require."

He paused again, and lifted his glass. It wasn't affectation. He wanted to judge Banister's reaction to that.

"Except possibly one," Banister said.

"What's that?"

"Willingness to serve. Perhaps I don't like being fooled so much."

"That's up to you," Palfrey said easily. "You don't know enough to matter at the moment, if you don't want the job you can say so. Still, your war record and one or two other things suggest that it won't frighten you. You've no ties – no girlfriend or parents. Pam Smith gives you full marks for being the perfect gentleman, by the way, she said that she hardly realised that anyone like you still existed!"

Banister didn't speak.

"Pam works with us without knowing much about us," Palfrey went on.

“See it as three concentric circles. Pam and a few hundred others are in the outer ring. You and perhaps fifty others are on the middle ring – or can be – and we three with a few more are in the centre ring. As for what we are and what we do—” He smiled, still faintly, and began to toy with a few strands of the fair hair. “That’s always the difficult thing to explain. One might almost say a kind of international M.I.5.”

He paused and smiled.

He spoke so mildly, deprecatingly, as if apologising for what he was saying. He didn’t really surprise Banister. The actual meeting, the definite assertion that these were Secret Service men, had a curious effect on him. It was a kind of paradox – a surprise which in some queer way he had expected. As he looked into the heavy-lidded eyes of the man named Palfrey, he realised that everything had pointed to the Secret Service.

“On a real world basis,” Palfrey emphasised.

He said that so that Banister accepted it; he believed they were Secret Service men working on a world basis.

“Until he blotted his copy-book, Stefan here was the Moscow representative,” Palfrey went on.

Banister felt a greater stirring of excitement as he looked into the face and the calm eyes of the giant.

“Moscow still has a representative with us,” Palfrey said, “and most nations – not all, but most, and that includes all the big ones – have representatives. Headquarters are here in London, but we have agents all over the place.”

Banister felt that this was really some kind of examination or test; much as his first interview with the Russian and the American had been. He had another curious feeling; Palfrey’s eyes were not so mild as they seemed. They had a penetrating quality.

A light glowed in his eyes . . .

It faded, and the impression died; he became ordinary again as he went on in an apologetic voice: “Don’t get anything wrong, Banister. We aren’t attached to UNO or to any Government or any group of Governments, We belong to no *bloc*. Once we joined one side or another, our usefulness would be finished. We aren’t employed by Governments or groups of Governments, but most make us a yearly grant to help meet our expenses. If we come across some murky business – plots between countries, for instance, that kind of thing – we get out of it as fast as we can. If Russia sends a dozen men to find out what it can about the American hydrogen-bomb plant, or the Americans slip a few of its nationals into the industrial area beyond the Urals, it’s not our affair. We’ve a different job – a kind of world police force.” He leaned back in his chair. “Sounds shockingly melodramatic, put like that, doesn’t it?”

“I see what you mean,” Banister said.

The words came out awkwardly; he felt as if he hadn’t used his voice for a long time. In fact, he had said practically nothing since he had come into the room. Palfrey, the others, the whole set-up, had a hypnotic effect; as if

he had been warned to keep silent, and knew that it would be folly to say much.

It was unreal; and at the same time, it seemed much more real than his daily life.

"You see," Palfrey was saying, cuddling the big glass as if it were precious, and raising it so that the bouquet drifted gently up to him, "there are bad men about all the time. As if you didn't know! Governments are not the only people who want to make trouble. The day of armaments rings making wars may be over, but there are things to remember. Power – power through might – is no longer the prerogative of the nation with the biggest population. One man or group of men might discover or develop a weapon as potentially destructive as the atom bomb, even the hydrogen bomb. That's not nonsense, you know." He looked as if it were most important for Banister to understand that, and glanced at the American. "Is it, Corny?"

"It is not." The American spoke with quiet emphasis.

"Stefan—" Palfrey began.

The Russian smiled, and said: "There was once a woman who found a way of warping the minds of children – and thought that she might dominate the world by making youths her slaves."[1]

As he spoke, it was as definite as if a judge were pronouncing sentence; as if there could not be the slightest doubt about the truth of the statement.

"You see?" Palfrey's voice was boring into Banister's consciousness again. "Let me give you an easy example to follow. Bacteria can be used very simply. Imagine, for instance, a chemist who can produce the cholera germ, or smallpox, any germ you like – perhaps one of an unknown disease against which there is no known protection; and imagine him having a few agents to take these round the world. It could *almost* be done through the post! People can't see germs, after all. They wouldn't make a mark on the whitest piece of cream-laid note-paper. That's an extreme example; the point I'm making is that it wouldn't be difficult to cause a hell of a lot of trouble for the world. A few men, a few fanatics – thwarted Hitlers, perverted patriots, incipient dictators – could cause a great deal of damage. It's our job to dig 'em out, find out what they're up to. Do you see what I mean?"

Banister's mouth was dry. "Yes."

"I felt sure you would," Palfrey said. "Of course, we have to take a few risks – but don't we all? It's hardly on a level with the risks that some of the supersonic pilots take. Risk is relative, anyhow. The importance of life is relative, too—or don't you think so?"

Banister forced himself to speak. "I'd go a long way to save mine, but given—"

He boggled at the word which was on the tip of his tongue.

"I know what you mean," Palfrey said amiably. "Given the proper cause, you'd throw it away. We think you could do a job for us. You'd be risking your life. In fact, from the time you began, from the time the other people discovered what you were doing, you'd be in the front line. If they decided to kill you, the assassination might come at any time and in any way. Of

course, you might get away with it. We'd help where we could. But the risk would remain."

Palfrey stopped, and this time sipped his brandy. Bruton picked up a small glass of cognac, and drank. The Russian simply stretched out his long legs.

"What do you want me to do?" Banister asked.

They had expected his response, yet they were obviously pleased. Neither Palfrey nor Andromovitch the Russian would ever be demonstrative, but Bruton couldn't sit still any longer. He jumped up, slapped Banister across the shoulders, and then began to move about the room. Palfrey and the Russian ignored him.

"Monk-Gilbert went from country to country examining and testing uranium ore from different mines. He needed to study the earth strata near the mines, because he was always searching for an ore of superior quality to most of that now used. Certain grades are more economical, as they have a much greater yield than others. On his last trip, he visited one uranium field in Africa, one in New Zealand, one in Australia, two in Canada and one in Arizona. Six in all."

Banister nodded.

"In one of these," Palfrey said, "he found something completely new. Or we think he did. He found an ore which, when refined, causes instantaneous death. It is really rather horrible." *Rather* horrible! "You might shake hands with a man – an insulated person – who has a smear of this substance on his finger. You would die – just like that."

Palfrey snapped his fingers.

Banister clenched his teeth.

"In short, he found a substance which has certain radioactive qualities not previously known, in which death is contagious in the way of ordinary illnesses. It is passed on from one to another. One touches the substance, there is a flash, and one dies. It has an effect rather like that of a high-voltage current of electricity. A bright flash comes at the moment of physical contact, although there is no burning; death appears to be from shock. The only outward or visible sign is a small red mark at the point of contact. Monk-Gilbert had one on his hand. A man might be sitting in the corner of a railway carriage, apparently asleep – and actually be dead. A man might be walking along the street, stumble, fall – and be dead. We know the effect of the stuff. We know that a dead man is 'live' in the sense that anyone once touching him, is killed instantaneously."

He paused. Banister caught his breath at the significance of that statement, but didn't interrupt.

"We know a little about the substance itself, but we don't know who is using it."

Bruton stopped immediately behind Banister's chair.

"But it's being used," he said abruptly. "It's killing a lot of people, and some of them matter."

Banister said: “Who?”

“There have been a number of scientists, not all of them outstanding; a number of Secret Service men; one or two business men. Several of our fellows, too.” Palfrey paused, and then repeated: “Professor Monk-Gilbert died this way.”

“But I saw him just after he died,” Banister said very slowly. He knew what this meant, if Palfrey were right. “I saw the wound, the blood—”

“That was done immediately after death,” Palfrey told him, “in an effort to hide the fact that this substance – we call it *fatalis* – had been used. The frightening thing about *fatalis*,” Palfrey continued in the same matter-of-fact voice, “is that we’ve found no defence against it, and no way of telling who might pass it on. We do know that certain agents – like the two men who attacked you – are insulated and can touch an infected body with impunity. But we’ve only met *one* man who was insulated *and* not a member of the organisation which we’re hunting. At least, we’re taking a chance that he’s naturally insulated. He certainly touched an infected body “

Banister didn’t speak. He was quite sure that Palfrey meant him. He, Neil Banister, had touched an infected body, and lived. No wonder he had been suspected and put through such stringent tests!

He felt shivery.

“We’ll deal with that in a minute,” Palfrey went on. “There are brighter sides. There doesn’t appear to be much of this stuff available, as far as we know. The people who are using it have to be very sparing. We aren’t sure, but certainly it hasn’t been used very widely yet. Monk-Gilbert himself told no one what he had actually found, but hinted at it, and experimented. We know that he infected – if that’s the right word – a single mouse, and turned it loose among twenty others. Ten minutes later, all the mice were dead. He left a note of that, before he died. But he didn’t say which of the uranium fields has yielded the *fatalis* – this by-product of the uranium ore. We have to find out where he discovered it, and also whether the same stuff exists anywhere else. The individuals using it may have a secret mine or may be using ore from mines being worked by Governments in various places. The obvious people to look for it are scientists, all the nuclear-fission johnnies, everyone who is as advanced as Monk-Gilbert was.” Palfrey shrugged, almost a Gallic gesture. “But we can’t afford to have our leading scientists killed at a touch, can we?”

Banister stood up, took out his cigarettes, lit one, and slipped case and lighter back into his pocket. He moved back from the table. He felt stiff and cold, although it was warm in here.

“Well, what do you want me to do? I’ll do what I can.”

“We want you to go to the places which Monk-Gilbert visited, after you’ve learned some rudimentary facts about uranium, the way it’s mined and refined.” Palfrey was more brisk; back in an ordinary, logical world of affairs. “You know that his stooge, a real scientist, is going around. You’ll team up with him.” He smiled, and his eyes looked sleepy again. “We’ll build you up as a great physicist, too! You see, whoever attacked Monk-

Gilbert thinks that the assassins failed, that Monk-Gilbert's still alive. They know what Monk-Gilbert discovered and can't understand why he hasn't told us. They may think he is probably hoping to make a deal, and so use it to his personal advantage," Palfrey went on. "At least, that's the most likely construction that they'll put on the fact that although he's running around, they – whoever they are and wherever they are – are quite safe.

"We've made as sure as anyone can that they don't know we as an organisation were interested in Monk-Gilbert," Palfrey added quietly. "We watched him very carefully and closely, but he slipped away from us – and went to his death. We had known that he was in danger, because two attempts had been made on his life before. When those failed, *fatalis* was used. What we don't know for certain is why Monk-Gilbert was going to your flat – or to a neighbour's."

"Don't ask me," Banister said. "The other flat was empty, anyhow—"

Palfrey said: "Yes. We've decided you're in the clear, and are ready to use you. If we're wrong—" He broke off, with a shrug. "Forget it. Much of what I've been able to tell you is the result of piecing together fragments of evidence, but much of the puzzle is incomplete. You'll have to take it from us that we've given you a reasonably accurate picture of the situation. Because you're insulated, you might be *the* answer we want – our means of getting at whoever is behind all the attacks, at whoever is manufacturing *fatalis*."

Banister stubbed out his cigarette. He was affected by the calm face of the Russian, and sensed the impatience of the American.

"We'd like to find a lot of others who are insulated against it, and also like to find out what does the insulating," Palfrey said dryly, "but we can't experiment very easily. Rubber gloves don't help – Monk-Gilbert was sure about that. Certain forms of synthetic rubber and certain thin metals appear to insulate the human body against the *fatalis,* but from our side the whole thing is in its infancy. But someone has it, has used it, and is producing more. We are satisfied that it isn't any one of the nations in the United Nations Organisation. It might be anyone – one person with a few helpers, a group of fanatics of any race, colour or religion. The one hope of finding who it is lies in finding where *fatalis* is produced – or where it exists in the uranium ore."

"That's if Monk-Gilbert actually found it at the place where these other people get it," Bruton broke in.

"We can hope," Palfrey remarked dryly. "Well, Banister, what do you feel about it?"

Banister said slowly: "I can think of a thousand other things I'd rather do. But I'll try. I take it that I'm to go round with the fake Monk-Gilbert as if I'm working with him – and that will make me a fake expert." He forced a grin; it wasn't easy. "And these people will be trying to kill us. You hope to catch our assailants. They have to attack before you can tell who they are. We're the bait – and I'm the live bait. I may be attacked again, and if I'm still immune, then my assailant will be so surprised that I ought to get him.

Something like that."

There was a long silence.

"You don't miss much," Palfrey said, at last. "Yes, that's it. We feel sure that believing they've failed, they'll try on 'Monk-Gilbert' again. We'll give you all the protection we can, but can't guarantee a thing. We can't even make sure that you're still insulated."

"Is Monk-Gilbert's stooge coming with me to the different mines?" asked Banister abruptly.

"Yes. And at first he'll be the main target," Palfrey said. "Have you the slightest idea why Monk-Gilbert was near your flat?"

"No."

"We think he might have gone hoping to see his niece." Palfrey was very soft-voiced. "You know her."

Banister had a feeling that a bomb was about to burst . . .

"Monk-Gilbert was Rita Morrell's uncle," Palfrey said.

Chapter 5

Banister went through a series of medical examinations, blood-tests, allergy reactions, but no guide to his immunity could be found. At the same time, he began a short period of intense training.

The technical side was only touched upon lightly; he did not need to know much. In any case, his mind wouldn't take the facts and figures in. Nuclear energy, radioactivity, splitting atoms, generating heat which could vaporise steel – he believed in them all, but couldn't grasp the mechanics of them all.

He also learned how to walk along a street and find out whether he was followed; how to tell if a car were following him; how to judge whether he was being watched from a window which seemed blank and empty. He learned judo; learned to turn on a sixpence, shoot on the draw, throw a knife, use a cosh – all of these things, until he was expert.

He learned how to regard Rita as a possible enemy. She was still out of England, but Palfrey did not know where.

Above all, he learned to *lie*.

He learned what one had to do to make a lie sound like the truth. He learned not to lie until he had seen in advance all the implications, all the things he would have to say afterwards to make the lie seem as honest as the day. He didn't like this, either, but knew that it had to be done.

Over a three months' period, he learned to think of the man who had come to his flat and called him Neil, as the real Monk- Gilbert. He talked of him as Monk-Gilbert, to him as Monk- Gilbert, *thought* of him as Monk-Gilbert. He had his photograph taken a dozen times with the fake scientist. He himself became "Dr." Banister; all his credentials were faked. He almost came to believe in himself as a specialist with at least the qualifications of the dead Monk-Gilbert.

The most difficult thing was to see the real Monk-Gilbert as Rita's uncle.

Now and again he saw Bruton or Palfrey; he didn't see the Russian again. No one talked to him about any other activity of Palfrey's group, which was known as Z.5. He had to concentrate on this activity to the exclusion of everything else. He was told now and again of another indication that *fatalis* had been used.

Three months after starting his training, he saw Palfrey again in a house in Mayfair. Palfrey looked exactly the same, except that this time it was the middle afternoon, and he held a cup of tea instead of a brandy glass.

"It's on from now, Neil." His voice was casual and calm, nothing suggested that he was conscious of the nightmare horror of the possibility of sudden death striking at anyone, anywhere, any time. "You and Monk-Gilbert leave for Canada tomorrow. You'll fly, of course. You're going to inspect the Quebec and the Saskatchewan uranium fields. A car will call for you at six in the morning, and you'll meet Monk-Gilbert at the airfield. Bruton and Andromovitch are out of the country, but they ask me to say *au*

revoir, bon voyage, all the usual things."

He put out his hand. His grip was cool and very firm.

"God be with you," he said.

"Thanks," grunted Banister, and turned away.

Odd thing, that; one didn't associate Palfrey, Z.5, Secret Service, violence, lying, duplicity, forms of treachery and all that kind of thing with an earnest, obviously a sincere: "God be with you." In an odd way, it said much more than that. Palfrey had a way of saying a great deal by implications and by innuendo – he could even convey a lot by a smile. "God be with you," had stated that Palfrey believed in God, that he didn't regard himself as an all-powerful genius sitting in the centre of the world-wide web of Z.5.

In the cold morning light he met Monk-Gilbert at the airfield next day. They took off at seven-thirty. Twelve hours later they were at Idlewild Airport, on Long Island. They transferred to a smaller aircraft and were in Quebec within twenty hours of leaving London.

"We're going to see one or two of the leading scientists here," Monk-Gilbert said, "and probably leave for the uranium fields in the morning. No reason why we shouldn't relax a bit." For a man of sixty, he kept extraordinarily fit. "I've never been here before, let's do a bit of sight-seeing."

"All right," Banister said.

They strolled through the steep, narrow streets, past small houses with colourful roofs, small windows, French architecture. They heard more French than English spoken in both streets and shops. It was cold, but dry and clear. Two Security men walked behind them, casually, and a woman was also watching; it was like being surrounded by an unseen barrier.

They passed the Château Frontenac in its dark grandeur, strolled across to the wooden platform of the embankment overlooking the St. Lawrence and watched the evening sun glistening on the calm surface of the water.

Then Banister *felt* danger. . . .

It came from a girl.

She was an attractive creature, tall, dark-haired; not unlike Rita. She walked casually, as if in no hurry. She was alone. As Banister and Monk-Gilbert drew nearer, she turned towards the railings overlooking the river, and leaned against them.

Banister felt as if a sixth sense were warning him. There were several other strangers about, but the girl seemed to matter most.

"Move round her," he said to Monk-Gilbert, who looked sideways, startled. "Give her a wide berth."

"Why?"

"I don't like—" began Banister.

She darted forward. Her hand was bare, and outstretched. Banister stepped swiftly between her and Monk-Gilbert, and their hands touched. Hers was smooth and cold.

In that moment, he stood at the door of death – and fear chilled him, heart, mind and body.

But he lived.

Once fear had gone, he had time to look into the girl's dark eyes – and saw stupefaction in them. She had expected him to collapse, was astounded that he hadn'He snatched at her hand, she saw her danger, twisted round, pulled herself free, and ran down the slope towards a car which was parked in the road. Two of the Security men approached her, bewildered passers-by stood watching.

She tried to dodge the Security men, and nearly succeeded before one of them grabbed her hand.

There was a vivid flash, far brighter than a magnesium flare, a choking cry – and the man who had touched the girl reeled away from her and fell. The other man recoiled as the girl ran wildly down the wooden slope. A car was waiting for her, the rear door open. Banister could have raced after her, but as he moved, he saw the gun in the hand of the driver of the car.

He spun round.

"Get down!" he cried, pushing Monk-Gilbert savagely. "Get—"

There were three shots. Bullets flashed above Banister's head and over Monk-Gilbert. Then the car engine roared, the door slammed on the girl, and the car roared off, with police already moving towards it. One leapt into the road, arms spread, shouting at the driver to stop. The car didn't even swerve, and the policeman leapt towards the side, struck the kerb and went flying.

The car screeched round a corner.

On the boards of the promenade a man lay dead. Another man was moving towards him.

"Don't touch him!" Banister called urgently. "Don't touch him."

"Why—"

"We mustn't touch him for at least an hour," Banister cried. "Can you get the promenade cleared, a cordon of police thrown round?"

The Security man looked sick.

"What—what is it?"

"Can you get the promenade cleared?" Banister roared.

"Sure," the Security man said huskily. "I'll fix it."

He took another look at the man who had been walking by his side only a few minutes before, then set to work.

Nothing else happened in Canada. Nothing was discovered at the uranium fields.

Ten days later Banister and Monk-Gilbert landed at an airfield in Arizona, near a canyon where experimental work was being carried out on uranium. A car was at the airport to meet them.

There were few cars on the road. They climbed a slight hill, travelling at seventy, breasted it – and saw the car coming towards them.

"*No!*" gasped Banister.

It was worse because there wasn't a thing he could do. He heard Monk-Gilbert's sharp intake of breath, and the gasp from the driver. The other car was just in front of them, leaping forward. Their driver swung his wheel, the head-on crash didn't come.

Banister felt the wheels skidding, heard them screaming, was flung to one side. Then he felt the crash as the back of the car struck the one that was heading for them. The screaming tyres sounded like furies in torment; the earth, the sky, the road, seemed to shiver and shake and crash into one another – the car lurched, swayed towards one side, steadied, then struck a rock and turned turtle.

Banister was thrown heavily on to Monk-Gilbert.

The driver gave a funny little rasping sound, and didn't speak. He was dead.

"Neil," Monk-Gilbert said, hoarsely.

"Yes?"

"I can't stand much more of it."

"There probably won't be much more," Banister said.

"It'll never stop," Monk-Gilbert muttered. "And we don't get anywhere. If we were getting results I wouldn't mind. I can't stand much more of it – just waiting to be shot at and knowing that if the tenth attack fails the eleventh will probably succeed."

"We've only had five."

"*Only* five," Monk-Gilbert barked.

There was a brittle note in his voice, and he looked much older than he had six months ago.

They were in Australia, in a small house in the hills outside Adelaide. They had finished their work at uranium fields in the northern part of South Australia, had watched all the experimental work, found nothing which remotely resembled *fatalis*. New Zealand had only a small, experimental uranium field, but there was some report of peculiar incidents at Rotorua. Palfrey had cabled, in code, and asked them to go there.

"I tell you I can't keep it up much longer," Monk-Gilbert said. His voice was husky and he coughed as he lit a cigarette. His eyes were veiny, largely because he was drinking too much whisky. His hand wasn't steady even when he picked up a glass. "I'll have to throw my hand in. I'll never stop cursing the day that Palfrey discovered that I looked like Monk-Gilbert."

"Take it easy," Banister reasoned, "it will probably end before long, and —"

"Don't talk like a congenital idiot! It'll *never* end." Monk-Gilbert jumped up and began to pace the room. "Haven't you the sense to see that? It'll never end—until they've killed us. And we don't know a thing more than when we started. We haven't caught anyone. That girl in Quebec—the driver

in Arizona—the man in Samoa, *Samoa* of all places!—on the airfield at Sydney, then up near Darwin—" He stopped, swung round and snatched up the whisky bottle. "I tell you I can't stand it."

He strode across and stood towering over Banister, who sat in a large armchair, smoking a cigarette. Banister didn't feel good, either. He was too hot. Even in the right weather life was a strain which he felt more every day; now Monk-Gilbert was making the situation ten times worse. He had shown signs of cracking at Samoa. They had put in there because of engine trouble with the aircraft they had flown in to Australia – and been attacked by night.

Banister forced himself to smile as he wiped his wet forehead.

"Have a drink, and sit down."

Monk-Gilbert sneered: "I thought you'd start warning me *off* the liquor. God, what do you use for blood? You're not human, you're—" He broke off, to cough, and the spluttering bout lasted for a long time. When it was over he wheezed noisily, and he was almost maudlin. "You're lucky," he said brokenly. "They can't just touch your hand and kill you, but they can mine. You're protected, but I—"

"They've only tried *fatalis* once, in Quebec," Banister said, "and I'm just as vulnerable to other methods of killing. You've got to see this through."

"Oh, *have* I?" Monk-Gilbert screamed at him. "To hell with that, to hell with you, to hell with Palfrey, to hell with the real Monk-Gilbert, to hell with—"

He swung the bottle at Banister's head.

Banister thrust his arm aside, and clipped him under the chin. As Monk-Gilbert backed away, arms waving, mouth agape, Banister took the bottle away. He felt desperately sorry for the man, who wouldn't last much longer. There were too many bouts like this.

Twenty minutes later Monk-Gilbert was in bed, sleeping – snoring.

Banister went back to the main room. Outside were the woods and the hills and the quiet, above them the stars and the promise of a hot day tomorrow – and tomorrow there was to be the flight to Rotorua. Monk-Gilbert ought not to go.

Banister had told Palfrey what was happening, and Palfrey had acknowledged the reports but made no suggestions.

It was one thing to talk to the scientist about keeping steady, about getting results; another to believe that results would come. They desperately needed prisoners who could lead them to the makers of *fatalis*. They were sticking their necks out so that they would be attacked and their assailants caught, but nothing had come off. The man in Samoa had been captured – and had died in prison, from poisoning.

He and Monk-Gilbert were too much on their own.

Security men were outside now, but they needed someone like Palfrey, Bruton, Andromovitch – someone with whom they could talk about *fatalis*. Banister himself was feeling the strain; Monk-Gilbert worsened it, that was all.

Banister went to the door, and stepped outside.

A Security man was near.

“He’s quieter now, isn’t he?”

“Sleeping,” said Banister.

“Must be a strain, using your minds the way you scientists do,” said the Security man.

“At times.”

“I’ll bet. Staying in Australia long?”

“I’m not sure.”

That was always the answer. One could trust no one.

“Wonderful country,” the Security man said. “Why, there can’t be a better-planned city than Adelaide anywhere.”

He lit a cigarette, happily.

“It’s fine,” Banister said mechanically. “I’m going for a stroll.”

“Don’t go too far.”

“Coming?”

“Mick will look after you,” the Security man said. “I’ll stay and look after the old gent.”

Banister moved off, lighting a cigarette. The second Security man joined him, and they strolled down the drive towards the road. Across the road, they could look down upon Adelaide, with its myriad of lights and the beauty that night laid upon it.

They were looking when they heard the roar, from behind them. With it came a blinding flash, and next moment blast carried them off their feet. Banister felt himself thrown between the trees and towards the steeply sloping hillside – as fire leapt up, behind him.

Chapter 6

Banister struck a tree, which broke his fall. He was hardly conscious of what he was doing, but lay still. He saw flames and the sky about them seemed ablaze. Particles of smouldering, burning wreckage had fallen among the trees, already a dozen little fires were leaping up about the grass.

He staggered to his feet, and moved towards the sound. The Security man lay on his back, unconscious, with his right leg twisted beneath him. Banister lifted him, awkwardly; he was heavy, bulky. There was all the light Banister needed, for the wooden house was a mass of wild, surging flames. Fires were getting a hold among the trees, too.

A different white light showed – headlights, some distance off. They might be those of a car driven by someone who lived near here or was passing through, but – trust no one. He left the Security man by the side of the road, and backed among the trees. One, with a misshapen trunk, gave him shelter – but there wasn't much shelter anywhere.

The light spread a lurid glow.

There was a crackling sound as the fire spread through the grass; he saw it leaping up trees, festooning the branches. He felt the increasing warmth as it came nearer.

The headlights drew nearer, too, swaying up and down. Then another car appeared, and another.

The first drew up, Banister saw a man and a woman in it. The man jumped out and hurried towards the figure huddled up in the road. Banister heard him call: "You drive on and telephone the police, Mary!"

They probably lived nearby, there was nothing to fear – yet there was always something to fear. From this moment on, it would be worse, Banister would be the only target. He might be safe from the casual touching hand, from *fatalis* itself, but he could never be sure that a bullet wouldn't come out of the blue and kill him. He could not cross a road and be sure that he would reach the other side without being crushed to death. Now, he could not go to sleep and feel sure that he would wake – if "they" could blow up this house, they could blow up others.

There was no safety.

The food he ate, the drink he swallowed, perhaps the very air he breathed, might be contaminated.

The heat drove him out of the trees.

He went forward.

He recognised the giant Russian, Andromovitch, among the people.

Banister did not speak to the Russian then, but made sure that the giant saw him in the lurid light of the fire. Then he began to help clear a stretch of woodland of undergrowth. He sensed the fear, of a big forest fire, which drove the men and women to a fury of activity. Police and fire-fighters arrived, and worked to confine the outbreak until the sweat poured off

them. No one gave a thought to saving the house; there had never been a chance of getting Monk-Gilbert out alive.

The fire gradually subsided. The crackling about the grass, the flames which leapt up to the lower branches of the eucalyptus, all lost their venom. Banister walked alongside the giant Russian to one of the line of cars pulled up some distance along the road. Banister sat very still as Andromovitch drove off. Police waved them on.

Monk-Gilbert had been drunk with fear, and collapsed. Banister had put him to bed, and might as well have buried him alive.

"You are very quiet," Andromovitch said. He had a slight accent, but the most noticeable thing about his voice was that he uttered each word so carefully, his articulation was perfect.

"Where's Palfrey?" Banister asked harshly. "I want to see Palfrey."

"We're going there now."

"So he's in Australia?"

"Wherever you are," Andromovitch said, "there is Palfrey – and either Bruton or I. You are never so much alone as you feel."

Palfrey hadn't changed.

He wore a well-pressed brown-linen suit, his eyes looked mild and sleepy, his chin weak. They were in a house in a suburb of Adelaide, not far from the sea – to reach it, they had driven along a sea road, with the pale sands and the darker sea on their left, the stars reflecting on the water. They passed hundreds of small houses, most of them with the windows dark; but here and there one was lighted.

Palfrey was in a front room.

His hand-grip was very firm, curiously reassuring. He offered drinks, cigarettes and an armchair. Banister sat back.

"I was hoping that we could fake his death before it actually happened," Palfrey said. "He couldn't have lasted much longer, Neil. Feel all right yourself?"

"Up to a point. Show me a ten per cent chance of getting results, and—"

"You've got some results," Palfrey said.

Banister became tense. He sat without blinking, without speaking.

"The driver of the car in which the girl escaped at Quebec," Palfrey said. "He was caught last week. We had some luck – he was recognised by a Quebec policeman, we were told, and held him and worked on him."

"Well?" Banister's voice was cracked.

"We know that the girl went from South Africa to Quebec. He knew her as Dora Smith."

"Smith!"

Palfrey smiled faintly.

"Of course, that wasn't her name, but it's *a* name. The driver had a handkerchief which she'd dropped in the car. It had a monogram DS on it – so it might be Dora S plus. We've got the description you gave us, and we've checked that with the description of the Security men in Quebec and this

policeman and the man who drove Dora about. Now we're trying to find her," Palfrey said. "I can tell you one thing for certain."

"What?"

Banister felt the rising of fresh excitement; felt that it could choke him.

"She's been seen at Rotorua. There's been a uranium find near there lately and some phenomena which made it worth our investigating. That's one of the reasons why you're going there."

Banister said: "I know that if we don't take some chances we'll never catch anyone. If we could get hold of this girl—"

He stood up. "All right, you've given me the ten per cent chance I asked for." His voice was very hard and jerky. "What else is happening? With *fatalis*, I mean?"

Palfrey didn't answer, but went to a desk, opened it and took out a slim book, with black-leather binding. He handed it to Banister. Inside were Press cuttings – all reporting the sudden death from "heart attack" or other, more mysterious causes, of men and women in a dozen countries. Most of them were scientists. One of the world's renowned soil-erosion experts was among them. The discoverers of a drug which had shown remarkable results in the treatment of arthritis had gone, too.

"Why?" he asked helplessly. "People like that, I mean."

"Your question and our question," Palfrey said. "That's a spare book. There might be a clue as to why it's happening. You can be quite sure that the list is accurate. We haven't included anyone unless there is evidence of the flash just before their death. Now, about New Zealand," he went on casually, "we've reason to believe that your Rita is there."

The news was like a physical blow. It hurt, badly, and with the hurt Banister realised that Rita wasn't out of his system; that she still mattered.

Palfrey must have known, for he went on gently: "She's staying with a Dr. and Mrs. Scott – her uncle and aunt. She's made no attempt to hide herself. I don't know what it means – but I want you to see her."

Banister looked at the lake as the car sped downhill towards Rotorua. The lake seemed to be laughing in the morning sun. It was hot, but without the all-enveloping blanket heat of Australia. The grass had a lush greenness, and the small folds of the hill were emerald, too. Here and there a tall tree fern grew higher than the rest of the bushes and shrubs.

He was alone in the car.

He had travelled with Monk-Gilbert by his side for so long that this solitude felt unnatural.

They turned a corner, and the lake vanished from sight. Soon, Banister smelt a different odour.

"What's the smell?" he asked.

"Oh, the *sulphur,"* The driver turned his head. "That's from the springs and the geysers, gets very strong sometimes.

The wind's this way today, too. Won't be long before you can see the steam."

"Steam?"

“Comes out of the earth, just like central heating,” explained the driver. “You’ll see.”

Soon, they were approaching Rotorua, and the smell of sulphur grew stronger. Now and again Banister caught a glimpse of a small cloud rising out of the earth; once they stopped, and the driver pointed.

Steam was rising from the ground and also from a yellowish pool of mud. Banister watched, fascinated. The mud was bubbling. He could hear the little plop-plop-plop – like a saucepan of simmering soup.

“You wait a minute,” the driver said.

He drove on, and then swung the car round. They had been climbing; now they looked down upon the town itself. A valley looked as if it were alive with smoke – it was possible to imagine shells bursting among the green of the gorse, the grass and the shrubs.

“If you’re going to stay a few days you’ll have to go through the village – Whaka,” the driver said. “That’s the native place, the *pah*. The geyser’s there, too. You want to get hold of—”

A car came from behind them, at speed; even the driver sensed that there was something unusual. That sixth sense stabbed at Banister. He ducked, and covered his head with his arms. He expected an explosion or a rattle of shooting, but all he heard was a squeal of brakes.

“Crazy fool,” growled the driver.

Banister opened his eyes and looked out. A car was almost alongside, nearly touching. Another car, coming towards them, just had room to pass; the driver glowered at the driver of the car next to Banister’s. That driver was sitting erect, wore a peaked cap, took not the slightest notice as the passing motorist yelled:

“They ought to take your licence away!”

Banister heard, yet didn’t understand. He could not see anything clearly – except the girls. There were two in the car next to him. One was the girl of Quebec who had killed a man by touch.

The other looked at him, and he believed that she was trying, to harden her expression but could not.

It was Rita; *his* Rita.

Their driver moved off.

Rita looked round at Banister, but didn’t lift her hand. She still smiled.

Then another car passed, and Palfrey was sitting by the side of the driver.

Banister heard the sudden squeal of brakes, the roar, then the rending noise of the crash. His own driver drew in a sharp breath, and they raced on.

Banister could only see Palfrey’s face in his mind’s eye. Rita’s faded.

Chapter 7

The girl's car was almost out of sight. Palfrey's was on its side, and the driver was scrambling out of one door, Palfrey out of another. The car had been thrown over a thin wire fence, and steam curled upwards from cracks in the ground beyond. Not ten yards away there was a little pool of mud, which popped and spluttered like a boiling cauldron.

Banister hurried to Palfrey, who picked himself up smiling and gave a little chuckle.

"She has a sense of humour, after all!"

"What was funny?" asked Banister.

"She tossed a smoke bomb out of her window," Palfrey said, as his driver came up. "It scared the lights out of me."

"Out of *me*, too," growled the driver. "I thought we were going to be blown into little pieces. Now perhaps you'll listen when I tell you that you shouldn't play around in these jobs yourself, Sap. You're crazy to. You go back to London." The driver, a middle-aged man with a noticeable New Zealand accent, was red-faced with anger. "If they kill you we'll really be in trouble. If a few of us are bumped off, it won't make much difference."

"Agree with him, Neil?" Palfrey asked mildly.

"I don't know you well enough," Banister said.

"Thus speaks an honest man!" Palfrey looked along the road, where another car was slowing down. "You can give me a lift back. Mike, you wait until I get in touch with you again, will you?"

"Oh, it's like talking to a brick wall," growled Mike.

Palfrey and Banister went to Banister's car. The chauffeur was standing by the door and talking to other motorists who had just arrived. More were coming along.

"The police will soon be here," Palfrey said. "Let's get off, and leave them to Mike." He lit a cigarette as he settled back in the car, and they moved towards the town itself. "How are you feeling, Neil?"

"I'm all right."

"Did you see her?"

"Yes."

"Dora Smith was with her. They're both staying with the Scotts."

The sharp edge of Banister's shock was blunted, now; Rita had been suspect, now she was known to work with – "them". Now he would have to fight her; it might be a life for a life, death for death.

"What else have you found out about her?" he asked gruffly.

"Rita Morrell is the daughter of a Rhodesian tobacco farmer who left him three years ago, and has officially been studying in London, but as far as I can find out, hasn't done much actual studying. She has travelled widely as secretary to a man named Menzies, who seems to have disappeared. She is known to have used at least three names and three false passports, but her real name is Rita Morrell."

"Oh," said Banister. He looked at the steam rising so strangely from the green land, but hardly noticed it.

"I wish I knew why she was here," Palfrey said.

"You said that she'd been here before."

"I thought I knew why, too – that she was going to try another attack on you. You're the chief target left."

After a pause, Banister said: "Are you sure she threw a smoke bomb?"

"Oh, yes. Not at all lethal! It looks as if she is going to try new scare tactics. I think we'll have to wait and see what they're going to be. Of course —" Palfrey wound down his window and tossed his cigarette stub out, then closed the window again—"we could pick her up, but she's taking an obvious risk, quite deliberately. I think we'd better try to find out why."

"It suits me," Banister said heavily.

"Well, be careful."

"Look here!" Banister turned sharply to face the other; his voice was brusque, his manner one almost of resentment, "What are you driving at? Where have I let you down?"

"My dear chap – you're magnificent! But Rita's clever. She is also beautiful. She knows how you felt about her. This is simply a warning."

"What are you expecting – that she's going to try to seduce me, or something like that?"

"Something like that," said Palfrey. "Now . . ."

One report which came from Rotorua was about fish – trout – which appeared to die when they came into contact with other fish. Several reports had been received in London, Palfrey told Banister.

Banister went out, with a Security driver, from the small hotel near the Blue Baths in the heart of the little town. He was used to Security men, was getting used to the smell of the sulphur and the steam that was always in the air. He was also getting used to the dark faces of the Maoris in the streets, but he couldn't get his mind free of Rita and Palfrey's warning.

He was driven out of town, towards Taupo, then off the road where a sign read: "Trout Pools".

The private road was narrow. It was broad daylight, and warm but not overpowering. The colouring of the trees was beautiful. At the end of the road they came to a small log hut, where two or three men stood about.

Palfrey was there.

They walked very quietly, until they came to a pool of crystal-clear water which reflected the perfect blue of the sky, and reflected the tops of trees – reflected their faces, too, as they looked down into it. Thirty or forty fully grown rainbow trout swam about lazily. The picture was so different from anything Banister had seen before that he felt tension easing. He watched the trout swimming in their endless circles.

Palfrey brought him back to the present, with a stab.

"They're going to introduce the killer fish soon."

"Killer?"

Palfrey's look said: "You know what I mean."

Another man came carrying a large galvanised bucket. He had a long untidy moustache and looked miserable; melancholy. He stood watching the trout for a moment, then shrugged and tipped the bucket up and poured its contents into the pool.

The fish already there began to thrash the water and turn and dart and swerve, as if anxious to get away from some unknown threat. One fish joined them, sliding with the stream of water out of the bucket. The man with the moustache stood looking down; other men appeared. Banister heard the whirl of a cine camera, but didn't glance round. The pool was a reflection of the sky and the sun's brightness, and the spotted fish gave it beauty as they twisted and turned, gliding more slowly now as their alarm subsided.

There was a flash.

It wasn't bright or blinding, nothing like the flashes which Banister had seen before – but a moment later, one of the fish floated to the surface.

Banister felt his hands clenching unseen steel.

There was another flash; another fish rose.

"It's murder, that's what it is, plain murder!" growled the man who had brought the bucket with the killer fish. "It oughtn't to be allowed. I won't do it again, I—"

He turned and flung himself along the path leading away from the pool; they could hear the thud of his footsteps.

The camera went on whirring.

Fish after fish floated to the surface.

Ten minutes later, the surface of the pool was covered with the dead fish, their mouths and eyes open. The sun shone down upon them, and the water of the pool was as clear as it had been – rippling as one, the killer, fish swam round and round, looking for fresh victims.

"All those had been treated with what we hoped would be a form of insulation," Palfrey said. "It didn't work."

Banister made himself speak: "Who handles the killer fish?"

"Anyone – with a net and bucket. There's no contact. The people who own the pools, which are spawning grounds of course, discovered what was happening. There were several killer fish. They were isolated, and they had no effect on one another, but killed any other fish with whom they came in contact. Mike – my driver – knew what we were looking for, and heard of this. That's one reason why we concentrated. We found Rita, and evidence of insulated fish – insulated or immune. But there's nothing to suggest any peculiar qualities in the uranium ore anywhere near Rotorua. We're wondering if it's a different form of phenomenon – there are sting rays and electric fish which can kill. But trout—"

He began to twist a few strands of hair round his forefinger.

"Has anything else been found?"

"Not a thing." Palfrey patted the strands of hair down into a little kiss-curl. He turned away from the pool, and the other men went ahead. "Except

that Rita has been here several times. Could be experimental? If so, why experiment with fish at this stage? They know what the stuff can do."

He seemed to be talking to himself more than to Banister.

Banister went back alone to the hotel, in time for lunch. He didn't feel like lunch, but made himself eat. Then he walked from his hotel towards a place which most people seemed to call Whaka. It was the local Maori village, parts of it centuries old.

He was alone.

He was followed by Palfrey's Security men, but none was near. For all he knew, a woman might be following him, too. He was never altogether sure of the precautions which Palfrey took – at times it almost seemed as if Palfrey didn't really trust him.

Was that surprising?

He reached the entrance to the village.

Beyond the high archway, he could see the red-painted fences, the carved figures on the posts, the little houses and, everywhere, the rising steam. He strolled along. He knew that he could hire a guide, but preferred to be on his own for a while.

The water flowing beneath a bridge was cold, yet steam rose from the edges. Two or three Maori children passed him, running, happy. A woman plodded by, carrying a pile of washing. The grotesque faces of the carved heads seemed to glare at him. All were painted a brilliant red, startling in the sun.

Some way ahead, a party was going round with a woman guide. Banister followed them. Soon he was walking over waste land – hard under-foot, but on either side were pools of boiling water, everywhere steam rose from cracks in the earth.

He saw a child run from the group which was being conducted, and a woman grab its arm.

"You must be *very* careful," the Maori guide said in a clear voice. "Nothing could save the baby if he were to fall in there."

Banister felt his nerves grow tense.

He could turn back and walk away; or he could go in the wake of the crowd, not with it; crowds were dangerous.

The ground was uneven. To the right and left the stream forced its way through the cracks. Here and there mud pools and pools of water bubbled and boiled. The group had moved away, picking its ways carefully over little holes in the ground, twisting and turning so as to step where there was no fear of the ground giving way.

He saw them standing and watching, waiting – then a spout of boiling water shot forty or fifty feet into the air.

A woman said in his ear: "Remarkable, isn't it?"

It was Rita.

Banister didn't start or turn round, but schooled himself to show no reaction;

that was part of the training. He was looking at the geyser. Spray from it was blown back towards him, and felt like warm rain upon his face.

"Yes," he said.

"It's a dangerous spot."

"Deadly."

"I'm surprised that you risked coming here."

"A man has to see a little life." Banister turned to face her, taking out cigarettes. "After all, I may never come to New Zealand again. It would be a pity not to see what I can, 'wouldn't it?"

Yes, it was Rita.

She was quite natural, and she had never looked more lovely. She had a soft, restful beauty. Her dark hair was glossy, and her clear brown eyes smiled so easily. She had beautiful lips. He knew all about them; all about her. She could drive him to distraction. He knew what it was to crush those lips with his; to feel her soft, seductive beauty; to have, to hold—

"Neil," she said. "I love you."

He didn't speak.

"And you're still in love with me."

He still didn't speak.

"You should leave Palfrey and come with me," Rita said. "He isn't the only one on the side of the angels."

Instead of taking a cigarette, she took his hand.

She did that quite deliberately. It did not so much frighten as stupefy him. The thing which surprised him afterwards was that her hand seemed icy cold. Then he felt a moment of panic. If she had the power . . .

Nothing happened.

There was a spot of burning where she had touched him, but it was not really painful. He didn't move his hand. She took a cigarette, and he flicked his lighter and watched her draw the smoke in. She looked at him through the first film of smoke that she allowed to drift from her lips. It seemed to cover her eyes, too, give them a great but misty beauty.

"So you are really proof against it," she said.

"Yes."

"And it isn't because of anything you've found?"

"Isn't it?"

"If it were, everyone working on the case would be protected," she said reasonably. "No one else is."

Banister made no comment.

"You're only the second person ever found," she said. "Only two – in five years. Do you know of any others?"

Unexpectedly, it was easy to smile at that trick question.

"You'd like to know," Banister said.

"It doesn't really matter." After a pause, she went on: "Are you going to stay and look round, or go back?"

He was sure by then that he wanted to be with her; she still had the familiar physical attraction, the once precious appeal. He didn't want her to

go.

"I'll see what there is to see," he answered.

"Let me act as guide."

"Don't put your foot through a hole in the earth," he said, "or on the spots where we might fall in, will you? I'm told that if you once fall into a boiling pool, you don't come out again."

"In some, you disappear," she said calmly. "The bones come back – later."

They continued to walk slowly. The sight-seeing party had moved away from the geyser; they were drawing closer to it.

They went down some steps. Water whirled about them, now and again so deep that they had to step high over it. Boiling water still spouted from the geyser.

They crossed a rickety wooden bridge over a calm stream – with steam rising from little pools on the banks.

"You can catch trout in that," she said, "and cook them in the pools without moving."

"There are a lot of things you can do with trout."

"Yes, aren't there?"

They moved away from the stream, and were hidden from the group ahead and from Palfrey's men behind by the tall bushes. The lane was narrow. Here and there they saw little pools of boiling mud – the smell of sulphur was very strong, here.

"You could become a great man," Rita Morrell said, unexpectedly.

"Really?"

"I mean it."

"I doubt it."

"What makes you think that Palfrey's worth working for or that he's doing the right thing?" she asked.

"I haven't seen him murder anyone yet."

"He asked you to sacrifice yourself for him, didn't he?" she said. "If he wants to do this, why doesn't he do it himself, instead of hiding behind you – and behind others, like Monk-Gilbert?"

"He can't be all over the world at the same time."

She laughed. The sun shone on her eyes and on her beauty, and there seemed nothing but purity in her; and goodness.

"He's fooled you," she said.

"Perhaps I'm easily fooled."

"Most people are. I think you—"

She broke off, and shrugged.

"Go on."

"I think you could do very well," she said. "Monk-Gilbert was impossible, we couldn't persuade him that he was wrong, but you might listen to reason."

"I'm always prepared to listen to reason."

She stopped and looked up at him, half-smiling. They were in sight of Palfrey's men behind them, now; and the sightseeing group had gone

towards the *pah*, the native village of bygone days; the voice of the guide travelled faintly back to them.

"I'd almost forgotten how good-looking you are," she said. "I wonder if you will really listen to reason."

She walked straight on, obviously determined to leave him alone. He didn't hurry after her. Palfrey's men followed her.

Banister walked towards the *pah* and watched her as she walked towards the main road, where a car waited for her. He stood in the shadow of a huge, magnificently painted totem pole as she climbed into the car, waved and drove off.

Chapter 8

Palfrey telephoned almost as soon as Banister reached his hotel. Banister repeated Rita's words *verbatim*, or so nearly that it made no difference. It was not easy, but it had to be done.

"So she asked you to change sides," Palfrey said musingly.

"That's right."

"But went off without explaining any more."

"Yes."

"You know," said Palfrey, in the casual way he had of making the most outrageous things seem normal, "we'll have to be extremely careful. It *looks* like a complete change of method. Until now, you were on the receiving end of murder. Now they're probably impressed by your immunity."

Banister knew all about that, but had not seen its possible significance so vividly before.

"They may try to bribe you," Palfrey went on.

"If you think—" Banister's voice sharpened in a flash.

"Steady, Neil, I only said that they might try!" It was easy to picture Palfrey's smile. "They won't expect to succeed. They may think that you'll pretend to fall for it, so as to fool them. In fact, they'll be trying to fool us. Just play your hand cautiously for a few days."

"You're watching Rita all the time, aren't you?"

"We know just where she is and where she goes, but she hasn't been in touch with anyone else yet – not anyone we've any reason to suspect," Palfrey said. "She's moved to Brent's, one of the biggest hotels. She doesn't appear to have made any friends, and she's only seen the Scotts twice since she moved."

"She must know that she's being closely watched," Banister growled. "I can't understand it."

"What part of it?"

"Why she's in New Zealand. How can she get away? A small airplane wouldn't help her, it's nearly fifteen hundred miles to Australia. I'd say that this is the most difficult place in the world to disappear from."

Palfrey said slowly: "I agree. Fully."

"Yet she can't *want* to be caught."

"That's the question," Palfrey said. "Does she? Is she hoping to pull off some kind of elaborate confidence trick?"

Banister didn't speak.

"See how it goes," Palfrey advised at last. "Don't take it for granted that there's nothing to worry about, either. This might just be a ruse to make you careless and easier to kill. Not that I think she'll kill you—"

"Palfrey," said Banister slowly, "I don't know how much you know or how far you've guessed. But she experimented with *fatalis* today. She touched my hand. She was prepared for failure, but she might have succeeded. If she'd killed me, she would have been on the run. Others

escaped from Canada, England, other places, but she couldn't have escaped from New Zealand – could she? She was prepared to take a risk which meant almost certain capture. Why?"

The chuckle sounded in Palfrey's voice again.

"She might have decided that you would be worth dying for!"

Banister flared up.

''Flippancy's all right in its place, but—"

"Flippancy might keep you sane before this is over," Palfrey said lightly. "You didn't arrange to meet Rita again, did you?"

"No."

"Just sit back and wait for her to get in touch with you," Palfrey advised.

Sitting back and waiting wasn't easy. Yet the tension eased. With Palfrey's warning fresh in his mind, Banister wasn't careless; simply wasn't living so much on his nerves for a few days.

Then, on the fourth day, Rita telephoned.

"I want to talk to you," she said. "That's if you trust yourself to me!"

There was a laugh in her voice.

"Where?"

"At the lake," she said. "Perhaps we could take a boat out. Supposing I call for you at your hotel, you're nearer the lake than I am."

"All right," Banister said.

"And it will give you time to telephone Palfrey!"

Banister was smiling when he lifted the receiver again, to call Palfrey. She had the ability to make him smile, and to raise his spirits in spite of everything that he knew about her. He was pondering over that when Palfrey answered. Palfrey appeared to have given up all pretence at secrecy, and was working in the open just as freely as Banister; and if the man Mike were right, Palfrey ought to be in London, directing operations.

"What did she want?" asked Palfrey.

"You *heard* her?"

"I've just been told that she telephoned, but haven't had a report of what she said yet."

After a pause, Banister said slowly: "When are you really going to trust me?"

"Trust isn't in doubt," Palfrey said, "but what would happen if you went out and didn't come back? We'd be completely in the dark – we can't work that way. *I'm* checked, whenever it's possible."

Banister didn't answer.

"What did she say?"' asked Palfrey.

Banister told him, almost word for word.

"I think you can take a boat out," Palfrey said. "We'll have you closely watched."

Banister said: "Palfrey," and made it a challenge.

"Hmm?"

"I ought to hate the sight of her, but I don't."

Palfrey said quite soberly: "Neil, every now and again we get an

exceptional agent. You're one of them. Not one in twenty new men would have thought it worthwhile to tell us that. Or had the courage. Thanks. A saint could fall in love with a Delilah, without being able to help himself."

Banister didn't speak.

"Have a nice time on the lake," Palfrey said. Lapsing into inanity seemed to help him.

Soon they were gliding gently over the calm water. Banister dipped the sculls in occasionally, and then let them rest. Rita sat against gaily coloured cushions. Her eyes were narrowed, but that was probably against the bright light. She dangled her right hand in the water, the fingers causing a series of little waves and a tiny wake.

"Wouldn't life be wonderful," she said quite calmly, "if it were always as peaceful as this?"

"Wouldn't it?"

"It could be," she said. "There's no reason why there should be wars and rumours of wars and murder and pestilence and famine, and—"

She broke off.

"Crazy world," said Banister.

"I think," Rita said, "that a way of making life – the world – *really* peaceful – has been found."

"Wonderful!"

"I prefer you when you're serious."

"But it would be wonderful," he protested. "Tell me about it."

"Not yet," she said. "Neil, *fatalis* was discovered by accident. No one knew what it could do. Then we began to experiment. We found that it would be the one weapon that would frighten everyone."

Banister broke in roughly: "That's right, you could make them feel frightened – you could terrify them. You could make them wonder whether the hand of their closest friend could be taken safely – or whether they could step into a car, brush against any man, woman or child, go to a theatre, be among people anywhere – and be safe. You could work on their minds with fear, and twist and torment them. Don't tell me, I know. I saw what happened to Monk-Gilbert. I was with him while it happened. I don't like your little ways."

She said quietly: "That's because you are filled with prejudices and conventions – you don't see things as they really are. Neil, I've a proposition to make."

He didn't answer.

"I'm serious."

"Go on."

"Come away with me," she said. "Let me show you exactly what we are doing. I think you'll probably agree that it's good, not bad. You could come back and try to convince Palfrey."

"And if I thought it was bad?"

"You could still come back." She was eager. "You wouldn't be able to lead

Palfrey to us, we'd make sure of that. If you threatened any danger, you'd be killed. That would be a silly risk to take, wouldn't it?"

Banister said bitingly: "It isn't exactly a tempting invitation."

"I thought you would have leapt at it," Rita said, and now she laughed at him. "It's what you want to do, isn't it? It's why you're working for Palfrey, surely. At the moment he doesn't know what is going on. This would be a big chance to find out. I don't have to plead with you," she added, and her manner grew suddenly offhand. "I had a lot of difficulty in persuading my—friends—to agree to let you come. You must please yourself."

He didn't answer.

"*Palfrey* will tell you to accept," she said, an ugly sneer spoiling her voice. "The risk won't be his – it will be yours. He'll agree that it's a chance which you might not get any other way."

She was probably right.

"Why select me?" he asked, savagely. "Why not try someone else, someone who has more influence with Palfrey?"

"Oh, you fool," Rita said, very softly. "You dear, beloved fool. I want *you,* not any man. I want to spent the future with you – all of it. I couldn't before. I had to leave you, but I meant to come back. I love you so much, my darling. I had to watch my own friends try to kill you, but as soon as I could, I stopped them. I've permission to take you with me, to save your life. Come with me, and try to understand."

He could not find words.

She looked away . . .

Banister watched her disappear into the entrance of her hotel – in fact there were several entrances, and hers was in the middle. She didn't look round as she moved with that astonishing ease and grace. The doorway, the street, the air, seemed emptier, drabber, when she had gone.

Banister walked towards the end of the street and his own hotel.

She had spoken so simply. "I love you so much," she had said, as if that explained everything.

It was only now that he was really rejecting the thought, seeing it for what it was – a different way of breaking down his resistance. Palfrey had talked of plot-counter-plot, and could not have been more right. Yet Banister wanted to believe her.

Would Palfrey say that he should go?

Banister reached the hotel, and went up to his room on the first floor. He opened the door. He stopped abruptly, for a newspaper was spread over a table which had been pulled closer to the door, so he couldn't fail to read the headline. It was a small one, marked with blue pencilled crosses.

It read:

MYSTERY PLAGUE IN INDIA
Village Wiped Out

He couldn't hear a sound except that of his own breathing, and the thumping of his heart. He didn't ask himself who had put the newspaper there – he just read on.

> "Reports from Malpore Province, Central India, tell of a village of fifteen hundred people wiped out by a mysterious plague. A Government technician, arriving on a visit to the village in order to help to increase food production, found every inhabitant dead – some in their homes, some in the streets.
>
> "According to the first report, many wild animals were found dead also. Vultures which had descended to pick flesh off the bones of the dead had also died. Wild animals which would normally have gone to attack the village now gave it a wide berth, according to later reports. Government officers and a medical unit have been dispatched to investigate.—Reuter."

Banister's heart still beat furiously, but he was beginning to think again. He closed his eyes, and tried to picture the village. He didn't know India except from books and pictures, but he could imagine that place. He could see the flashes as the people died. He could imagine the horror in the people who had touched the *fatalis* carrier – the killer, like the fish. He seemed to see the pool again and the fish swimming, with the sun on all their colourful beauty – and then the killer sliding in from the bucket, and fish after fish rising; and as it rose each fish took on the face of a man, of a woman or of a child.

Banister dropped the paper. He was smoking a cigarette, although he didn't remember lighting it. He stood by the window. He could just see a corner of the main street, and the road which led towards Whaka, in one direction, and towards the lake in the other.

He could see Rita's face, her smile, hear her reasoned arguments.

He clenched his teeth.

There was a tap at the door.

He spun round, swiftly; one could be certain of nothing, and Rita might have talked as she had to lull him into a false sense of security.

"Who's that?"

"Palfrey."

"All right," he said, and went across and opened the door.

Palfrey was alone.

"Come in."

He saw Palfrey's eyes narrow, as if surprised by the look on his face. It was characteristic of Palfrey not to speak but to notice the newspaper, in the crumpled heap, and pick it up. He smoothed it out and read.

"Did you send it?" Banister demanded.

"No."

"Did you know about it?"

"A week ago." Palfrey was taking cigarettes from a gold case. Palfrey was just an ordinary human being, rather tall, slightly round-shouldered – with

that weak-looking chin and the full, generous mouth and the friendly eyes which could change so disconcertingly, and with lids which sometimes seemed to hide their brilliance. Men almost worshipped him, remember. "It's the first one to leak into the Press."

"So there have been others," Banister said, and the words seemed to choke him.

"Three others."

"Where?"

"China, not far from Pekin. Greece – a little mountain village near the Albanian frontier – and Ireland."

"*Ire*land?"

"Eire," Palfrey said very precisely, "if you prefer it that way. A tiny village in the hills near Killarney. No one heard about it for several days."

"You could tell me about these things," Banister said, and then growled: "Don't take any notice of me. It was a hell of a jolt. So was that newspaper – if you didn't put it there, who did?"

"Probably one of the servants. I'll check," Palfrey promised. "It doesn't matter what precautions we take, they can always slip through sooner or later." He sat on the arm of a chair, holding the newspaper, drawing at his cigarette. "How did you get on?"

Banister said heavily: "She invited me to go with her – to some mysterious place. She said she would give me a demonstration of the good which will come out of *fatalis*. All for love!"

As soon as the words were out of his mouth he wished he hadn't added that; it was like a form of betrayal.

"We'll have to think about it, shan't we?" Palfrey said.

Chapter 9

Suddenly it occurred to Banister that Palfrey looked tired; as if he was in desperate need of rest. Was it just physical and mental weariness, or was it reaction to the deadly things he knew about and tried to defeat?

"What else did she have to say?" Palfrey asked. Banister drew a deep breath, and forced himself to go on. He kept picturing a dead, deserted village – four of them. Horror crept into his body, like the chill from damp ground.

"She talked a lot of blah. How this could be used for the good of mankind. Would I go with her and see for myself? She said that I'd be set free later." His grin was taut, he could feel his lips stretching across his teeth. "Also, that she was inviting me, because she was still in love with me."

Palfrey didn't speak.

"She also said that you would want me to go," Banister told him abruptly, "Do you?"

Palfrey sat on the arm of the chair, with the cigarette in the corner of his mouth and the newspaper by his side. Banister could see the blue-pencilled crosses by the side of that headline about a mystery plague – *plague*, remember.

"Well, do you?" Banister asked harshly.

Palfrey smiled gently.

"On the whole, I think so. She might really be in love with you. She may be a killer, but she isn't a fool. She may be a fanatic. We had a spot of bother once with a man who was so appalled by the moral turpitude of civilisation that he decided that the only way to deal with it was to destroy the lot of us. With a bit of luck, he'd have managed it, too." Palfrey shrugged. "Remember what we were saying about the power of individuals and small groups in this scientific age. Also, remember that, as a naturally immune subject, you must be of absorbing interest to Rita's employers, so there's good reason to think you'd be looked after for a while. Prepared to go?"

He dropped that question out almost casually.

"How will it help?"

"We shall try to follow you."

"Supposing you lose me?"

"We can't guarantee anything," Palfrey reminded him, quietly, "but a lot would depend on not losing you, wouldn't it? If it were humanly possible to follow, we should. We'd arrange for you to take a few oddments with you that would enable you to tell us where you were, too. Or at least, they would give you a chance to."

"So Rita was right," Banister growled.

"She's probably right about a lot of things. She's obviously a reasonably good student of human nature," Palfrey said mildly. "But it's entirely up to

you, Neil. In some ways this would be better than the way I thought it might turn out, but—"

He broke off.

"What way was that?" asked Banister.

"We thought they might kidnap you."

Banister didn't comment.

"We thought that when they knew you weren't affected by the *fatalis*, they would regard you as a human freak well worthy of careful investigation," Palfrey explained. "It's true that they've had several shots at killing you, but Rita tested you out again and found that you aren't affected – and from that moment, she changed her tune."

"Yes, I know," said Banister, "I wish I could get the horror of it out of my mind."

Later, when Palfrey had gone, a letter arrived for Banister. He had been taught to be wary of all unexpected letters. This was bulkier than most, too. He went towards the cloakroom, holding it in his hand.

He could open it, and it could explode.

Or there might be a flash . . .

"Oh, to hell with it!" he growled.

But he opened it very cautiously in the cloakroom. Nothing happened. He held his breath when he actually folded the flap back; and still nothing happened.

He slid the contents out very carefully.

It was a fold of newspaper, and when he unfolded it, he saw the now familiar headline: *Mystery Plague in India*. Surely she didn't think it was necessary to tell him twice.

Two white cards fell out.

He picked them up, and read:

> "Dr. & Mrs. Montagu Scott will be happy if you can join them at a dinner-dance on Tuesday of this week at 7.30."

Across one of the cards was scribbled: "*Do come, Neil. I'll call for you at 7.15.*"

The signature was Rita.

Today was Tuesday.

This time, Rita had brought an American sedan.

She drove well, and obviously knew her way about the town. She took several turnings before she drew up outside a large house, which was on a hill overlooking the lake. It was nearly dark, and the evening had a gentle beauty. The last rich gold of the sun touched the mirror-like surface of the lake, and seemed to beckon anyone who watched it.

Rita had not hurried.

One of Palfrey's men pulled up behind the car; and another was at the corner.

“I’m sorry it was such a short notice,” Rita said, as they walked towards the front door together. She wore a three-quarter-length evening-dress of black net against a red petticoat, and had a scarlet wrap. Her dark hair glowed. The softness of her beauty matched the enchantment of the evening. In a curious fashion Banister’s bitterness thawed. He could see her as she was, dispassionately.

Dr. and Mrs. Montagu Scott were an elderly couple, rather charming, pleasant, vague.

“My aunt and uncle,” Rita introduced.

It was all so normal.

The house was larger than it looked from the outside, and a ballroom overlooked the lake itself. They caught the last golden glow of the sun on it, and the shimmering magic of the water. Soon they were among a crowd of youngish people, two or three pretty girls, two or three good-looking men; the rest of them were ordinary. Most had white dinner-jackets, one or two had purple. Drink flowed – cocktails, whisky, gin. A band played softly at one end of the room.

“Neil,” Rita said, “you always dance as if you love dancing.”

“It can be amusing.”

“Don’t you *ever* show enthusiasm these days?”

“I don’t feel enthusiastic. Did you send me both cuttings about the Indian village?”

“Yes,” Rita said. “You have to know how serious it is.”

He could have struck her.

Rita danced as well as any woman he had ever known, and carried his mind back to the days when there had been their love; and no fear, no sense of horror. The lighting was subdued; for a waltz the floor wasn’t crowded.

“Have you talked to Palfrey?” Rita asked.

“Yes.”

“Was I right?”

“Yes.”

“Are you coming with me?”

He felt the pressure of her hand tighten; she didn’t miss a step, but there was a slight hesitation in the smooth rhythm of their steps.

“I don’t think so,” Banister said, because Palfrey had wanted him to stall.

Rita’s voice seemed to cut into him.

“Why not? Are you still frightened?”

“Yes.” He looked into the brown beauty of her eyes. “It isn’t only the possibility of dying,” he said very quietly, “it’s the warped mentality behind it all – the thing that can make you, Rita Morrell, indifferent to the death and the terror of a whole village of people. You *look* sane. You’re very lovely. Yet this is a horror that makes your beauty as ugly as sin.”

The music stopped.

They moved slowly towards the side of the room, then Rita changed direction and they went to the open doors. Several other couples were walking about the sweeping lawn, just visible in the afterglow. Now stars

dotted the heavens and promised brightness for the night. There was a murmuring, as of the water of the lake against the shore; and the soft humming of insects.

Rita was holding his arm tightly.

"Neil, you're wrong, hopelessly wrong. It isn't ugly, it isn't madness. If you could see real beauty—"

"You're playing on words, twisting them, trying the old, old game – making the lie so big that it ought to convince. It doesn't convince me. I can see your beauty, and I tell you that it's as ugly as sin. I ought to—"

"Ought what?"

"I ought to kill you," he said harshly. "Then they couldn't use you any more.'"

"Neil, listen to me." They faced each other, and she took his hands, and he noticed that hers were warm. The light from the house shone upon her eyes; he could see every delicate line of her face and the seductive beauty of her mouth, the white gleam of her teeth as her lips moved. "Come and see for yourself what we're doing."

"I'm fond of life," he said.

There was a moment of silence. Then: "It's the only way to save your life," she said quietly. "You can't escape for ever. They've tried five times to kill you, and—"

"Six," he sneered.

Her eyes filled with annoyance; anger.

"Why are you tormenting yourself? It's the only way to save your life. They tried *five* times and failed, and I persuaded them to let me try to convert you. Come with me. If you should want to come back, we'll let you."

"Who says so?"

"I do.""And who can forbid it?"

She didn't answer.

"You see," Banister said roughly, "you can promise me freedom but can't guarantee that I'll get it. What's the real truth?" He found himself gripping her arm, very tightly; shaking her. "Come on, tell me – what's the real truth? You say you hope that I'll be converted, you think that if I can be fooled into coming with you, I might even believe the hideous nonsense you talk. You think that once I'm with you I won't want to come back here. Isn't that it?" He shook her again; but he kept his voice low. "*Isn't that it?*"

"I think they'll let you come away. I think they'll want someone to tell Palfrey and everyone else what we're doing. You can be the messenger, if you *want* to be. I don't need to lie to you."

"You're lying now."

"I'm not!" She almost spat. "Why can't you see that I'm trying to save you? If you won't come, they'll kill you. Or they'll kill others, and you'll feel that even more. They'll force you into going with me, because they—they want you."

"That's fine," he said savagely. "They want me, so you pretend to be in love with me, try to bribe me into going by promising me yourself!"

“Neil—”

“I ought to hate the sight of you, I ought to cringe at the touch of you,” Banister growled. He caught his breath, then crushed her to him, kissed her, felt the hard pressure of her teeth against his lips, then against his teeth. The seductive warmth of her softness pillowed his breast. She affected him like a drug.

Then he saw a flash, like lightning over the lake.

Another flash came.

He felt Rita wrench herself free as a scream shivered on the air, touching the night with horror. He saw Rita racing towards the ballroom. He saw men and women cringing back, staring at something in the middle of the room. He heard a yapping sound, a dog barking. He raced after Rita, and saw what she could see – two girls and a man lying on the floor, stretched out – and the dog, a terrier, yapping at the others, forcing them back.

He heard Rita say gaspingly: “He’ll kill them all, he’ll kill them all.”

Chapter 10

All that it meant and all the horror that it might mean flashed through Banister's mind. The dog, yapping at the cowering dancers; the couples clutching each other and pressing back away from it – and the two dead girls and the dead man.

The dog might escape, and if it did, would roam the town. Whenever it brushed up against a man, a woman or a child, there would be a flash – and death.

The fear of the humans would terrify it; Banister sensed something of that now; the dog itself was being driven mad by the terror which it caused in others.

Rita spoke again, as if she were praying that the dog would hear her and understand.

"Don't go out, Pip, don't go out."

A man moved forward from the crowd on one side, as if he intended to sidle up towards the dog and grab it.

"Don't do that!" Rita screamed.

The man turned. The dog, turned, too, and frisked about, snarling at the man. Banister couldn't be sure, no one could be sure – but the man's leg and the dog's teeth must have touched. There was a flash, and the man went down, falling flat; his head thumped against the floor.

A girl screamed.

"*No, no, no!*" breathed Rita. "I—"

She blocked Banister's path. He gripped her shoulder and thrust her to one side.

"Don't!" she gasped, and clutched his hands. "He might be too strong for you, he—"

Banister pushed her to one side. He heard men running behind him, heard Palfrey's voice.

"Neil, leave it to us. *Neil!*"

Banister was at the door. The dog was looking towards a dozen people all pressed against the wall, the men trying to shield the women. Terror had petrified their faces; there was no movement, just the glare of horror in eyes which a few minutes before had been soft and misty and contented. If the dog leapt at them, one or two would die; perhaps all of them. If it ran amok —

"*Neil, leave it to us!*" Palfrey cried.

"*Neil!*" Rita screamed.

Banister ran into the room, and snapped: "Pip, come here!" The dog recognised the name, and turned. "Pip, sit down," Banister ordered, and wondered with despairing hope whether it had been trained to obedience. "Sit—"

It leapt at him.

One woman screamed.

It flew at his throat. He thrust out his hands to grab its neck. He felt a sharp shock, but it was probably the wiry body smacked against his tensed arms. The dog wriggled and snapped at him, but he clutched it tightly with his free hand, shifted the other and got a grip on its neck.

He squeezed.

He knew that Rita was behind him, and heard Palfrey, just outside. He hardly noticed them. He kept up the pressure. He knew that everyone there was staring, but he heard no sound except the wheezy yelping of the killer dog; the only movement was its writhing body. Legs seemed to leap up and down convulsively, and it kept yapping at him, but the yapping grew fainter and the movements less vigorous.

Everyone seemed frozen into immobility.

The dog stopped moving. Banister held it for a few seconds, then put it carefully down on the dance-floor. It didn't move for he had broken its neck.

A woman gasped, and fell sideways; a man jerked out of his trance to catch her. Then others moved, and men and women began to talk in a high-pitched, frightened voice, and the men as shrill as the women.

The dog lay with its broken neck, and four people lay near it.

Suddenly, Palfrey was beside Banister.

"Now you've gone this far you'd better finish the job." There was a hostile note in his voice, different from anything that Banister had heard before. "Pick it up and come with me."

It was an order, and Banister picked the dog up.

"Take her away, I'll see her later." Palfrey spoke to some of his men, and two ranged alongside Rita. She was obviously terrified of touching the dog, so it would retain its death-dealing horror for some time. How long?

The men took Rita out of the room.

Palfrey walked on one side of Banister, and another of Palfrey's men, Mike, on the other. More men appeared at the French windows, as if to make sure that no one could follow them.

Palfrey said: "We'll go round to the front and take my car, Mike."

Banister did exactly what he was told. He climbed into the back of the car, with the dog on his lap. They started off. Except for the bright clarity of the stars and the yellow light at the windows, there was darkness; the lake and the beauty about it was hidden. The car's headlights shot out, suddenly, and lit up the trees at the side of the road and another house, not far away.

Banister looked at the back of Palfrey's head.

On his lap was the dead dog – which had killed four, and could have killed many more. He could lift it and press it against Palfrey's neck, and Palfrey would die; Mike would die, too. Even Rita had been terrified of contact with the body. It gave him a strange feeling of power, of supremacy, yet there was horror, too. It made him feel as if he were beyond death; immortal.

For the killer dog lay helplessly on his knees.

They stopped.

Palfrey told him when to get out; Palfrey produced a torch, and opened

the boot of the car.

"Put it in there, and we'll stand a guard over it," he said. "We'll check with mice or insects to see how long it holds the stuff. Then we'll bury it."

His voice was clipped, harsh and hostile. Why *hostile?*

Banister put the dog inside, and the lid slammed; Mike locked it. Mike and two other men who had driven behind the first car stood guard. Palfrey moved away, expecting Banister to follow him.

Banister followed.

They went into a house near the lake; and when they were in a small, book-lined room, with pleasant furnishings and subdued lights from huge parchment shades, Palfrey turned to look at him. Palfrey's eyes had that penetrating glow, but with a difference, there was rage in him. It showed in his voice and his look, in his words.

"You blundering fool, what are you trying to do? Ruin every chance we've got? Do you want more villages to be wiped out, more helpless victims slaughtered?"

Banister could only stare . . .

"Because that's what you seem to want," Palfrey went on savagely. "To save a few people whose lives don't count, you took a chance of killing yourself. You've never touched an infected dog, you don't know whether it could kill you – you just took a blind chance. What do you use for a mind? Why do you think we've done all we have to save you? Why do you think we've worked and planned and schemed and had men *die* to give you a chance of finding out the truth? So that you can show what a hero you are, so that you—"

"Shut up," Banister rasped.

"It's time you realised how much depends on you. You puff yourself up with the satisfaction of saving a few people who don't matter – make yourself a hero, and—"

Banister clenched his right hand, and raised it. He saw Palfrey's face very close to him. He wanted to smash his fist into Palfrey's face. He gritted his teeth until his jaws hurt. Then he saw fishes rising to the surface of a pool, their colours fading; and as they died, saw the faces of men, women and children taking the place of the silly vacant faces of fish.

He saw what Palfrey meant, and he knew that Palfrey was right.

He dropped his hand.

"All *right,"* he said emptily, drearily. "I *shouldn't have done it. But it didn't do any harm, and now we know that the dog's no more dangerous than a man."*

Palfrey took out a cigarette, thrust it between his lips and rolled it from one side to the other, without lighting it. He was very pale. His lips were drawn when they weren't moving the cigarette. His eyes had a peculiar, glassy brightness.

"I say I'm sorry!" Banister burst out. "What more do you want? What in hell can I do to make up for it?"

Palfrey raised his right hand in a quick, compelling little gesture.

"Nothing more, Neil. I'm sorry. First Monk-Gilbert and then me." Palfrey's

lips curved a little, but Banister sensed something of his inner conflict; and of his weariness. “Mutual apologies, offered and accepted. If you see me losing my head like that again, kick me in the pants.” He grinned. “To mix a metaphor. Or have I?” He lit the cigarette. “Have a drink.”

He turned to a cabinet, took out whisky and glasses.

“Not too much,” he said, as he poured out, “or I shall get rolling drunk, and that wouldn’t do.” He mixed the whisky with plenty of soda, and sipped. “Health. Luck. Success.” He put the glass down. “I’ve held Rita Morrell.”

“So I gathered.”

“What did she say to you?”

“Not really a lot.” It was only an hour or so since Banister had danced with Rita, strolled out into the grounds with her; it seemed as if it had happened in a different age. “More or less as before. She wants me to go with her. More talk of conversion! There was one thing—”

He broke off.

“Yes?” Palfrey was much more himself.

“She seemed really—distressed—that the dog was let loose.”

“So it seemed,” Palfrey agreed. “I wonder why. Distressed because of the harm it might do to others, or distressed because it had got loose?” He drew hard at the cigarette. “I think we’ll look round at the house, then tackle Rita. I had the place sealed off, no one’s been allowed to go in or out. If the dog belonged there—” He broke off. “Stefan’s making the preliminary inquiries, let’s go and see if he’s discovered anything.”

“Right.”

“Neil,” Palfrey said, “I think it was one of the lucky nights when you ran into Monk-Gilbert.”

Rita was sitting in a small cocktail lounge, smoking.

Palfrey said: “Well, I hope you’re happy.”

She didn’t answer, but looked at Banister as if appealing for help, for understanding. She looked shocked and shaken, but her beauty remained, a strange and calming loveliness. Banister associated her with death, and yet in her manner there was a kind of peace.

“Where did you keep the dog?” Palfrey asked.

“It was in my room tonight,” Rita said. “It had been brought to me earlier, because it was contaminated. We had been experimenting with it—”

“We?” Palfrey asked.

“There were others, but they’ve gone. We thought that the dog was immune – but there must have been a delayed action. I’d no idea this would happen.”

It was easy to believe her; as easy to think that she might be lying.

“How long have you and your friends had the dog?”

“For a few days.”

“Where did you get it from?”

“It was—sent to us. There were some manifestations of *fatalis* activity in

the hills near here, and it was noticed in some fish. We've known there was *fatalis* activity in uranium ore here—and in other places. We wanted to find out more about it, whether the deposits were extensive."

"Are they?"

"We don't know," Rita said.

After a pause, Palfrey asked: "Who sent you the dog?"

She didn't answer.

Palfrey looked at her steadily, gave Banister the impression that he was going to try to force an answer; instead, he asked a different question in the same mild voice; but it was enforced mildness; Banister knew that Palfrey was holding himself on a tight leash.

"What were you going to do with the dog?"

"Let it go, once I was sure it was free of infection."

"Then what were you going to do?"

"I don't know," Rita said.

"Do you mean you were waiting for instructions?"

"Yes."

Palfrey said softly: "Who would give you them?"

She didn't answer.

She didn't look at Banister now, only at Palfrey. Banister felt a strange remoteness, even from them. There was the beauty of Rita, and in Palfrey something he hadn't seen before; a steely strength. It was hard to believe that this was the man who had raged at him, who had hardly been able to get words out because of his temper.

Palfrey broke the silence.

"I don't know whether you quite understand what's happening, Rita." His use of her Christian name made the whole scene more bizarre. "You seem to have some idea that you can justify what you're doing. I don't think you'll find many people who will agree with you on that. As far as I'm concerned, you're deadly to everything that I think matters. You killed Monk-Gilbert, you've killed others, you killed these boys and girls tonight. You've the power of death in you. It's got to be broken. When villages get wiped out like the one in Malpore, whenever you give us a clear indication of how deadly you and your friends can be, we just have to find out who is doing it, and we have to stop it. Do you understand what I mean?"

"Yes," she said without expression.

"Good," said Palfrey. "It will help you to understand this: we can't work on ordinary rules and regulations. You will have to talk. We hoped that you would lead us to someone or somewhere else – you know that, of course. It hasn't come off. Now we can't wait any longer. You will *have* to talk."

He paused.

She shook her head; and there was a strange regality about her, a queenliness. Did Palfrey see and understand that? Or did she cast some spell over him so that he saw a beauty which others would not recognise?

"Nothing will make me talk," she said.

Palfrey began to play with a few strands of hair.

"That's what you think now." The quietness of his voice made it more impressive. "I don't want to torture you. I simply have to make you talk. Over the years I've learned a lot of different methods. Some work with men, and some with women. Rita, I *have* to be absolutely ruthless. I don't see you as a human being, as an attractive woman, I just see you as—" He paused, and Banister saw him draw in his breath, saw his eyelids droop for a moment. Then: "As an angel of death."

That hurt her.

It hurt Banister, too, because it was so apt.

An angel of death . . .

"If you should scream, I shouldn't hear," Palfrey said. "I should hear only the piteous cries of innocent people. If you should look as if you couldn't stand another twist of the screw, another brand of burning – I shouldn't see you, I should see the shocked faces of people whose loved ones have been killed – or a dead village – or a flash of bright flame with death as its carrier. Do you understand what I mean?"

Banister found himself, clenching his fists, grating his teeth so that his jaws ached. Palfrey's words came so quietly, so emphatically. He meant everything; he had to mean everything. If Rita would not talk, he would have to do what he threatened.

"Nothing will make me talk," she said.

After a long silence, Palfrey said: "I shall give you an hour to change your mind."

Dr. Scott seemed unaware of what was happening, when questioned, but soon facts were discovered. Men had been working in the great forests beyond Rotorua – men who had disappeared, doubtless Rita's colleagues. Everything seemed to come out, then. *Fatalis* activity was found in a small stream rising from the hills in the forest. So much news came in that the hour Palfrey had promised Rita was stretched to two; nearly three.

Then Palfrey finished studying the reports.

The guests were allowed to go home. An official statement, that the dog had been "charged with static electricity", was issued to the Press.

Palfrey went back to see Rita. This time Andromovitch was with him.

"Rita," Palfrey said in his mildest voice, "who sent that dog to you, and who was going to give you instructions about it?"

She didn't answer.

"Neil," Palfrey said, "leave this to Stefan and me, will you?"

Banister went out.

Chapter 11

There was a light at the window of the little cocktail lounge.

Banister stood in the garden, overlooking the lake, with the room's light behind him. A pretty, fair-haired security girl was by his side. She had followed him out into the garden, and seemed to be interested only in the lake and the reflection of the stars and the dark shadows that lay upon it and upon the earth.

From a house not far away there came the sound of radio music, light and lively; a sacrilege.

From the room with the lighted window, there came a scream. It broke a silence which had lasted for five minutes; or ten minutes; or fifteen. Banister didn't know. As he stood staring into the star-littered darkness, he could see Rita's face and the gloss of her dark hair, the lambent glow of her lovely eyes. He could see her lips moving; he could feel the touch of her lips.

She screamed again.

He stiffened; he felt the touch of the girl's hand on his arm, without realising what it was.

The radio music, some silly, lilting nonsense tune, went on and on. The stars made the shape of Rita's face, her body, her beauty.

The radio music stopped.

There was silence.

Banister waited for another scream, was sure that it would come, tried not to see the hideous picture of Rita's face, distorted in pain, tried not to guess what Palfrey and Andromovitch were doing; tried not to curse them.

She screamed!

He swung round.

The girl said sharply: "No." She held his arm, and he pulled himself free. "Neil, don't!" She moved swiftly, and in a moment she was in front of him, with her arms round him, and the softness of her breasts pressed against him. "Don't go, don't let him down."

Let "him" down!

"Get out of my way," Banister said viciously, and tried to prise her away from him. His voice rose when he failed. "Get out of my way, or—"

"Neil, don't let Sap down now, don't help her, this might be the first crack. It might break open after this." How desperately she pleaded. "Think of what she's done, just *think,* Neil – and think of what *might* happen. One dog in a crowd of shoppers, in a cinema, in—"

Rita screamed.

Banister didn't move, but no longer strained against the girl. His mind told him that she was right, but logic hardly mattered, emotions whirled him round and round in an angry vortex—

A car turned into the street, its headlights very bright. They seemed to flash. That tore Banister's thoughts away from the vortex, put dread into him again. He heard the girl's intake of breath.

"Was that—?"

"I don't know."

They watched the headlights swaying up and down. Against the glow they could see the silhouettes of Palfrey's men. The tyres crunched on the gravel road, and the engine purred. The car slowed down. There was no other flash; perhaps the one they had seen had been at the moment when the headlights had been switched on.

The car stopped.

A man got out of the driving-seat, while Palfrey's men closed in on him. He showed dark against the headlights, which were still on, but Banister couldn't see his face. His footsteps sounded, but Palfrey's men walked on grass.

Quite suddenly, Rita screamed again and again.

Banister felt the blood rushing to his head, felt that he hated Palfrey. He wrenched himself free of the other girl, who was looking at the newcomer.

The man stopped.

Palfrey's men were just in front of him now, and Banister expected them to speak – but thought less of them and the newcomer than of Rita; and Palfrey and Andromovitch and the screaming.

The stranger said: "Tell Palfrey that if he doesn't stop that at once, I shall strike death through the whole town."

Banister banged at the door of the cocktail lounge. He could hear nothing inside. In the ballroom there were subdued lights and the four dead bodies, the guards and the stranger who had just arrived – and behind him the girl, her fluffy fair hair adding to her prettiness.

Banister banged again.

"Palfrey!"

"Who's that?"

"Banister. Listen, Palfrey if you go on—"

"Neil," Palfrey said, as if he were nearer the door, "I'm sorry, but you've got to take it. You—"

"If Rita screams again," the stranger said clearly, "I will destroy the whole town of Rotorua; if necessary, the whole of the North Island."

Palfrey didn't answer.

The man added: "I'll wait for her in my car. Don't keep her prisoner, Palfrey, or I shall carry out my threat."

He turned away.

One of Palfrey's men called out: "Sap, shall we hold him?"

Palfrey didn't answer. The man walked towards the door, as if the possibility that he might be taken prisoner didn't occur to him. He was nearly at the door when that of the cocktail lounge opened, and Palfrey stepped out.

Perspiration streaked his cheeks, gathered in beads on his forehead.

The stranger reached the door.

"Spare a minute," Palfrey said.

The man turned round.

Carried away by the stresses of the past half-hour, Banister had not thought consciously about the man. Now he stood with the fluffy-haired girl by his side, watching Palfrey and the other. To say that the stranger was impressive was only partly true; he was much more. He wasn't above medium height: he had only average good looks, and yet – there was some quality about him which held everyone there. It was not simply in the steadiness of his grey eyes; it was as if he felt that his authority was supreme. Banister thought afterwards that perhaps the quality which impressed most was the courage born of his self-confidence.

"I think you heard me, Palfrey," the stranger said.

"Oh, yes," said Palfrey. "What brought you?"

"I knew that you were holding Rita, I was fairly sure what you would do."

"I shall go on doing it."

The stranger shrugged.

"You must please yourself about that," he said. "If you do it, there probably won't be a hundred people alive in Rotorua in the morning. I can spread death in a dozen ways – through dogs and cats and birds and people. Imagine what would happen once it started. It might take a few days, but—"

He broke off, and shrugged his shoulders, then turned round abruptly and started for the garden. "I'll wait for Rita."

"It's too easy," Palfrey said in a grating voice. "Much too easy. I shouldn't go yet."

The man said carelessly over his shoulder: "Please yourself about that, too. If you hold me, it will start very soon. I made the necessary arrangements. Palfrey, I *can* do it."

He walked on.

No one else moved.

He went along the path towards the car, where the headlights still blazed. He got in, sat at the wheel, and looked straight ahead of him.

Andromovitch came out of the cocktail bar. Banister realised how much confidence the Russian passed on to others – how sure he was of himself. Banister found himself hanging on his words. They came slowly.

"I think we'd better let her go, Sap."

"Yes," said Palfrey, after a long pause. "Yes, I'm afraid you're right."

He went into the cocktail bar. Banister moved towards the door, and the fluffy-haired girl, whom he had almost forgotten, took his arm. It was as if she were acting as a kind of watchdog, making sure that he did only what Palfrey wanted him to do; yet he didn't go into the room.

Palfrey and Rita came out.

There was no mark on Rita's face, no sign of hurt or injury – except in the look in her eyes, which were filled with pain. Banister felt worse than he had at any moment since this strange ordeal had started.

Palfrey took her to the hall, out through the door, along the drive to the car.

Two minutes later, it moved off.

The two cars which had followed the stranger and Rita Morrell were in collision with a third car coming towards them, three miles outside of Rotorua.

The stranger and Rita vanished.

Banister felt that Palfrey had known in his bones that this would happen – and wondered what hope he, Banister, would have of being followed if he were kidnapped – or if he went willingly to Rita.

His mind was in ferment.

The fluffy-haired girl was named Marion, which rather suited her; and she was as gay as she looked. That quality, which had shown through the strain and the tragedy of the night of the party, became more and more apparent. It was welcome, too. Banister felt that it kept him sane.

She was almost quaintly matter-of-fact.

She had gone back to his hotel after they had left the house. No one had talked much after hearing what had happened to the cars. Palfrey had seemed to withdraw within himself. Watching him and watching his men, Banister felt again the nature of the influence which he had over them. Anyone who had served Palfrey for any length of time seemed almost to worship him.

Marion did, for certain.

She was staying at the same hotel as Banister; he hadn't seen her before, and didn't ask how long she had been there. When they reached the hotel, the same night, he felt something of the balm of her presence. They sat talking aimlessly, for nearly two hours – drinking and smoking. At first Banister had felt wide-awake, but gradually he had become drowsy, talked for the sake of talking, hardly knew what he was saying.

When he woke, next morning, Marion was with him.

He lay looking at her. He ought to have been surprised at finding her there, but somehow he wasn't. He saw the laughter in her eyes, and remembered that he had felt that it was only just beneath the surface, the night before. She would not suffer long from the effects of horror, had a strength which she drew from something that he sensed, vaguely, to be a kind of faith.

"Did you dope my whisky?" he asked.

"No." She kissed the tip of his nose. "It wasn't necessary."

"Was I drunk?"

"Not very. Not really."

He grimaced.

"Drink was enough."

Her eyes mocked him.

"I think you knew what you were doing. I *hope* you did." She kissed him again, in the same quick, light way. "But Sap was right. He's always right, I think."

"Your hero, too?"

"Yes," she said.

"How was he right, this time?"

"You didn't say a word that mattered. I can guess how you feel about Rita, anyone who saw you last night must know, but you didn't rave against Palfrey, you seemed to shut the job out of your mind. He said that you could do that."

Banister said very slowly: "He might find himself wrong one of these days. I don't think I could have stood it any longer. That screaming—"

He broke off.

"I think I know how you felt," she said. "You must be desperately in love with her."

He didn't answer.

"Are you?" Marion meant to make him admit it.

"I—I don't know." When she didn't comment, just looked at him waiting for him to go on, he said more quickly: "I've never felt like this before, even about Rita."

He sat up, and slid out of bed. He wasn't wearing pyjamas. He sat on the side of the bed and pulled on his pants and slipped on a singlet.

"I'll ring for some tea," Banister said, and pressed a bell. "So you know about my past history. What made you do—" he found himself smiling —"this, for me?"

She didn't answer.

"Palfrey?"

"No," she said detachedly, "no, not really Palfrey. One senses the right thing to do. I've worked with Sap before, of course. I've seen some of the things he's done. He has a sixth sense – usually at picking the right men to help. The right people, men *or* women. He's sure that you're going to help to see this thing through, that you're the key to it. He knows how you feel about Rita, and in some queer way thinks that it's all part of the plan. He's a fatalist in some ways."

"Fatalist," Banister echoed. "I—"

There was a tap at the door. He put on a silk dressing- gown and opened it, thinking: "Palfrey's a fatalist!" and wondering why that seemed so funny; or so peculiar. He asked a middle-aged maid for tea for two, and didn't wonder why she looked startled.

He turned back to Marion.

She was sitting up, and pulling a wrap round her shoulders, looked demure, peaceful. She was more than pretty.

"Fatalist?" he asked.

"Yes. He's quite sure that when it really comes to a showdown, between right and wrong, or good and evil, evil always comes off second best. That's how Stefan Andromovitch put it one day, and I think he was right. Don't you?"

"It could be. But there are people who would regard you as a scarlet woman, who—"

Her laughter startled him.

"Well, let them," she said. "Sap asked me to look after you, that's all. He

didn't give me any precise instructions! He just didn't think it would have been a good idea for you to be on your own last night. I didn't, either. You probably don't believe it, but I will do anything, everything – kill, maim, wound, lie, cheat – *everything* – to find out the secret of this touch of death."

She stopped.

Banister looked at her, a smile on his lips and with growing understanding of her and of Palfrey.

"Wouldn't you?" she asked. "Do all that, I mean."

"I—suppose I would."

"And if the way I can help is to get you to relax for a bit, unwind you as Corny Bruton would say, well—that's the way I can help! You're easy to look at, you know. I could think of worse assignments. In fact, I wish—"

The maid brought the tea.

It wasn't until later in the day that Banister remembered that "In fact, I wish—" and wondered what Marion had been going to say. Then he didn't wonder for very long.

He felt less tense as the day wore on, although he heard nothing from Rita or from the man who had delivered that ultimatum. Palfrey seemed more himself.

There was a conference of agents at Palfrey's hotel, but little came of it. The uranium source and the *fatalis* activity region were taken over, scientists were already on their way from England. The dog had been *killer* for an hour after it had been put in the car; so they learned something from it.

There would be an inquest, of course, and the real cause of death would have to be disguised. There would be difficulties with the local police, the coroner and the local authorities, but everything would be smoothed out.

But they hadn't really made progress. They knew more of the horror of the thing; and now Banister knew that because of his immunity he was wanted by Rita's friends. He knew how much depended on him; and at times the burden was intolerable.

After the third day Palfrey called Banister and asked him to go and see him. Banister had been about to take Marion to a film.

"All right," he said promptly. "Now?"

"Please."

"I'll be right over." Banister rang off, and looked at Marion, whose hair wasn't so fluffy because it had just been set, and who looked a delight. "You'll have to go by yourself," he said, "the oracle wants me."

"I'll stay here and read," Marion said, "you may not be long." She stood up, and moved towards him. "Neil," she went on, slowly, "don't ever make the mistake of scoffing at Sap. Don't ever do that. Above everything else, you must have faith in him."

"I think I see what you mean," Banister said.

But had he that faith?

Palfrey looked as if he had also had a rest. His eyes were clearer, his cheeks hadn't that almost frightening pallor; there was no tension in him. He was

alone, sitting at a desk in his bedroom, smoking, with a typewriter in front of him and dozens of sheets of paper littering the desk.

"Come in, Neil – sorry if I spoiled the evening." He shook the papers into position and laid them in a neat pile by the side of the typewriter. "I *think* I know where they are."

Banister broke the quiet of his own tension.

"You only think?"

"I can't be absolutely sure, yet. I'd like to use you to act as bait again. I don't know why, but I've a strong feeling that they really want to win you over to their side. I think they'll try to kidnap you. I'd like you to move around a bit on your own. Stage a quarrel with Marion, then with me, and then rush off by yourself. We'd follow, although you wouldn't be able to detect us, and nor would Rita or her friends."

He stopped.

Banister drew his hand over his forehead. He felt a sudden quickening of his heart, and knew why – at the possibility that he would see Rita again. He had tried to tell himself that it didn't matter; but it mattered much more than he could ever say.

"Prepared to do it?" Palfrey asked.

Banister said slowly: "I'll do it, yes. I don't know that "

He paused, then began to move about the room. "Sap, I'm in love with Rita. I can't say what will happen if I ever see her again. If they should decide to kidnap me and take me to this place alive, then—I may not want to come back."

"I'll take the risk," Palfrey said. "Will you act as bait?"

"Yes," Banister said again.

Not until he'd gone did he realise that he had called Palfrey "Sap".

The swoop came a week later, when he was in Auckland, walking beneath the shade of the trees in the road outside the University. He had almost forgotten danger. He had almost given up hope that he would be able to do anything useful. Most pictures had faded, except that of Rita – and of the dead Indian village.

That was more on his mind than anything else.

He saw two men coming towards him without giving them a second thought. It wasn't until they stopped that alarm flashed through him.

They were like the stranger who had visited them in Rotorua – not unlike in feature, each was taller, but their complexion was the same; they were hardy, weather-beaten, sun-tanned. Healthy.

They ranged themselves on either side of Banister.

"Don't shout, don't attract attention, or I'll stick a knife in your ribs," one man said in a quiet voice. "Walk towards that green Chrysler there."

"Why, hallo, Banister," said the other man, as two couples drew near. "Fancy meeting you."

They got into the green Chrysler.

No one seemed to be watching as one man drove off and the other sat in

the back, with Banister.

BOOK TWO

THE STRONGHOLD

Chapter 12

Banister heard a sound, a low-pitched, droning sound which seemed to come from a long way off. He didn't move. He did not seem to be moving, either. Wherever he was, it was very still – yet he had an odd sensation, of motion.

He opened his eyes.

He saw nothing, because it was dark – and then he realised that a hood of some kind had been put over his head. He tried to raise his hands, to get it off, but his arms were fastened to his side. They didn't hurt, but he couldn't move.

He tried to turn his head, but could not.

The droning sound went on and on, until there was movement, a sudden fall, a change in the monotony of the droning before the smooth stillness again. Then he knew that he was in an aircraft.

Someone came near him. He heard the rustling sounds of movement, felt someone brush against his shoulder, and touch the hood over his head, but that was all. Then two men spoke, but he could hear only the sound of their voices, not what they said. That didn't seem to matter. He was glad to sit and relax, although it occurred to him that there should be no reason to rest, he hadn't exactly exerted himself.

He remembered the two men with the glowing complexions and the keen eyes, the green Chrysler, and the start of a journey down the hill towards Queen Street. The sharp prick in his arm had taken him by surprise – it wasn't until he had seen the man by his side smiling that he had realised that he had been jabbed through his sleeve with a hypodermic needle.

It had been his one moment of panic, when he had been tempted to try to open a window, to shout, to attract attention from the people in the busy street.

He had conquered that.

Then he had fallen asleep; it might have been an hour or a day or a week ago.

He began to wish that they would take the thing off his head; or that they would talk so that he could understand what they were saying. The droning, the men's voices, the occasional sway or fall of the aircraft created a monotony of its own peculiar kind.

Then he felt movement near him again. A moment later, the hood was lifted.

"Oh, he's awake," a man said in surprise.

"Hallo, Banister," said the other man.

These were the two whom he had seen walking towards him along that shady street within the shadow of the university.

"We didn't think you'd be round yet – sorry."

They spoke good, fluent English; colloquial, too. He did not doubt that they were English. Neither was particularly good-looking, neither was in the slightest degree vicious-looking, either. They looked like men who lived an open-air life.

"Like a drink? We could manage tea and biscuits, if you feel like that."

"It's a good idea," Banister said, calmly enough. "You might untie my arms."

"Don't get violent this time," the nearer man warned. "You go and get the tea, Ted."

"All right, Jim." The other went off.

"Violent?" echoed Banister.

"When you first came out of the barbiturate we pumped into you, you were ready to fight the world," said the man named Jim. "You look calmer now." He unfastened the cords which bound Banister's arms to his sides. "Cigarette?"

"I'll have the tea first."

"Good thought."

The man glanced out of the window, and Banister found himself doing the same, while wondering why the man named Ted and the man named Jim were exerting themselves to be so pleasant. Did the answer matter, yet? He saw clouds drifting by, revealing patches of clear blue sky, the kind of picture he was likely to see on any fine day when in the air. Then he looked down and saw they were above the cloud bank; not far below it was ten-tenths cloud.

"We'll soon be landing," Ted said.

"Oh!" Banister found it possible to smile. "I suppose I shouldn't ask where we are."

"You can ask!"

The man turned as the other came along the narrow passage carrying a tray with tea, biscuits and bread and butter. They were the only passengers in the aircraft, which could carry twenty or more. Banister began to count the seats, then gave up.

The tea was hot, fresh, welcome.

The bread and butter was fresh; the biscuits crisp.

Afternoon tea at ten thousand feet or so, flying – where?

"We won't be long," said Ted.

Then they broke through the cloud.

Banister felt his heart turn over; felt that stab of fear which set him quivering. For as the cloud parted, a great snow-capped peak thrust its grandeur through the gap. The peak could not be far away. All Banister could see was the snow, broken here and there by the black darkness of rocks.

The aircraft swayed.

Ted and Jim did not speak. Banister glanced round, and saw that they were staring out of the window; they had almost forgotten him, seemed to be touched by fear.

Banister looked out of the window.

Below was a scene of bewildering grandeur. The snow lay thick and virgin white and smooth save where the jagged rocks pierced its breast, as if to threaten with impaling any who dared fly within its reach. Great ravines were like ugly, gaping mouths, filled with snow and yet with room for more and yet more – mouths that would swallow the aircraft and not notice that it was there. The snow looked so thick and white and still – it could cover the aircraft and forever keep its secret. More than all else, the snow seemed to draw Banister and the other men downwards with an irresistible attraction.

They flew farther along a valley, with great peaks rising on either side; and there was less snow here. Banister could see the green of grass or some mountain growth, and the blackness of the rocks – even stunted trees, a long way down. Then he saw something else, which stabbed through him like the final harbinger of disaster.

There lay a wrecked aircraft.

He saw the broken wings and the crumpled fuselage and the lost or buried nose. One engine lay some distance from the heart of the wreckage; black, burned.

They flew over it.

Banister watched until it was out of sight.

There was snow, desolation, the harshness of rocks, a great silence rising out of the valleys below them.

Then, quite suddenly, they flew within the shadow of a range of peaks, and below them the ground, although rocky and split with crevices filled with snow, did not look so hostile. Soon Banister saw what seemed to be a long stretch of flat table-land. Two aircraft stood against the snow; there were hangars; black dots that might be people.

They *were* people.

"Better put some warm clothes on, Banister," said the man named Ted.

He was holding out a fur-lined coat.

Banister waded unevenly through the snow. He wore heavy fur-lined boots, and they made him stagger from side to side, but he needed them, for the snow was nearly a foot deep. It was all about him on the mountain-side, just here an unsullied field of snow. Ravines and gullies slit the mountain-side above his head, but not here.

He had no idea where he was.

In the south island of New Zealand? In one of the great mountain ranges of the Antarctic? He kept thinking of that, but not very deeply. It was all he could do to breathe and keep moving. Soon he had to concentrate on those two things.

They neared the mountain-side, and climbed steeply for thirty or forty yards; then the man in front of Ted disappeared into the side of the rocks.

Banister stopped.

His mind flashed back to the moment when Pam Smith had hurried away from him and walked *through* a wall. In exactly the same way the man in front had walked *through* snow-covered rock.

The man behind bumped into him.

"Go on, get a move on," he said, "let's get inside."

The second man in front of Banister disappeared. Banister made himself go on, then saw that there was a hole, like a doorway, in the rock. The hole led into a tunnel; at the end there was actually a door. The man behind Banister said: "Just push – where the handle is."

Banister pushed.

Warm air swept out and about him, and he stepped inside a brightly lighted *street*.

That was the odd thing; it was as if he had come out of doors, into the street of some city built of pale stone, in graceful lines. Here were houses; buildings; shops; and the light was like the light of day.

"Straight on," the man said. "You can take your hat off and loosen your coat, now."

Banister obeyed, and just walked on, dazed, bemused, but beginning to understand what had happened. There was a kind of city inside the mountains. City – town – village, what did it matter?

Hallucination?

Ted, still leading, turned a corner and entered a tunnel. Ahead was a door in a wall of rock; and beyond it steps, hewn out of the solid rock; and at the top of the stairs another door, which opened into a square room which might have been found in any large house.

The man who had taken Rita away was there.

So was Rita.

"Hallo, Neil," she said, "I'm glad you've come."

Her voice was quiet, and the words were simple. She smiled as she spoke, and took Banister's hand. It was cold from the bleak air of the mountain outside, and hers were warm.

"Let me help you off with your coat," she said. "Then we'll have something to eat. Would you like a drink?"

"Er—please."

"Mix him a whisky-and-soda, Klim, will you?"

Rita spoke to the man who had taken her away from Rotorua. He was talking to Ted; the other men hadn't come in here.

"All right, my dear."

Klim moved towards a cabinet at the side of the room. Ted followed him, talking, reporting what had happened, going into detail.

"No, we weren't followed . . ."

Was he sure of that? He seemed sure; and if he were right, then Palfrey had failed. Was that surprising, Banister wondered dully.

Rita helped Banister off with his coat, and folded it over a chair. He sat

down heavily. She would have gone down on her knees to pull the fur-lined boots off, if he had let her. He didn't. He pulled them off himself, and she picked them up, took them to the door and put them just outside. When she came back, the man named Klim was handing Banister a whisky-and-soda, and saying: "One for you, Ted?"

"Do you mind if I skip it?" Ted said. "I haven't seen Lorna for a week!"

"Off you go," said Klim. "We'll leave together, I want to have a look at the lower-level laboratory." He glanced at Rita and Banister, smiled faintly, and added: "I'll be about twenty minutes, Rita – don't let him run away!"

He chuckled, Rita smiled, Ted grinned.

The two men went out; the door closed. Banister saw it swinging to and fro, before it settled and stood still. He finished his whisky-and-soda.

He was wearing the clothes he had worn in Auckland's summer, and they were warm enough. Rita wore a linen dress of wine red, trimmed with white. Her eyes had the brown beauty that meant so much to him, and her hair was a mass of rippling black. The dress clung to her figure.

"Like another?" she asked.

"No—thanks."

She took cigarettes from a small table, and lit one for him, then put it between his lips; there was a mark of the red of her lipstick on it. He looked round the room. It had a low ceiling, in spite of the warmth the air was very clear. The furniture was light – light-coloured pine or larch or birch, he thought, rather like Dutch or Swiss furniture; as mountain chalets might be furnished. The floor was of some kind of composition, made to look like parquet flooring; but he could tell that it was imitation. There were a few skin rugs, the largest of a huge black bear, its back towards Banister.

Rita drew up a chair.

"The surprise will wear off," she said.

"Where are we?"

"You can't really expect me to tell you that, yet! I think Klim will, as soon as he feels sure that you won't want to go back and join Palfrey and his well-meaning helpers. But don't think about Palfrey or the outside world yet. You must be tired."

"I've been worse."

"You'll be much better! I don't know why it is," Rita said, shaking her hair back from her face, "but up here we always feel much less tense. Nothing is so desperate as it seems down at sea-level. I suppose it's something in the air. And the height gives a sense of—" her eyes danced —"supremacy."

"I see," Banister said.

"On some days, when we can go out, it's magnificent," Rita told him. "Until you've lived here, you've never known what winter sports are really like. You'll find out, before long, I think the weather's soon going to break."

Banister didn't speak.

"I'm not going to worry you with too much argument for a start," went on Rita, "but I have to say this again, Neil – I hope you will decide to join us.

I'm sure that we're right. Klim will tell you more about what we're doing, later on. I'd like to tell you about this place, High Peak."

"High Peak," Banister echoed, because she seemed to expect it of him.

"Yes, that's what we call it. There are seven thousand people here, men and women and children. It's a perfect city. We have no sickness, no ill-health, no social problems. Food is grown in artificial soil, without difficulty. Black, white and yellow people live here in perfect amity. Everyone has enough to eat and drink, has sufficient comfort. There are films – from the world outside, of course, with all its incredible folly – and we have our own amateur dramatics, our own Literary Societies, everything. I really mean that. *Everything.*"

Banister looked his scepticism.

She smiled.

"All right, wait a minute." She leaned forward to a television set, and pressed a button; it began to hum, but no light appeared. "Everything is a long way ahead of yours, up here," she said. "What you think might come in the future, we have as a commonplace today." The screen began to glow, then a face appeared; a face of a Chinese girl. "Oh, Yun Lin," said Rita, "ask Klim if I can take Neil round the community, will you?"

The Chinese girl smiled.

"Yes, Miss Rita, one moment."

Her face disappeared; the screen still glowed. Banister looked at it, as if he could not believe his eyes; and he could not. He saw Rita's smile – and the beauty of it, the lovely lines of her lips, meant nothing for the moment. He couldn't think beyond a kind of awed wonder.

The Chinese girl came back.

"Yes, that will be all right, but Klim says please be back by five o'clock."

"I will—thanks, Yun Lin." Rita switched off, tossed back her hair again, and said: "That gives us an hour. Or would you rather have a rest?"

He stood up, slowly.

"I'll come with you."

"I thought you would," she said.

She slid her arm through his, and they walked out together, pushing the door, which swung to behind them.

During the next hour, Banister found that no doors locked; not even in the houses, between room and room. Somehow, that registered in his mind as remarkable, even among this city of fantastic wonder.

Rita led him, always with a hand on his arm, down the steps and into the streets; and they *were* streets. It was as if some giant system of caves had been turned into a modern city in the mountains. Rita told him a little – of the engineers who had perfected the system of ventilation; who had created artificial light so that it was like daylight all the time – it would fade with the day outside, she said, and the city would be lit by different lamps. Air-conditioning was adjustable, too; it was cooler at night than during the day.

Banister listened, marvelling.

There were shops where most things one would buy in the "outside"

world were on show; windows were attractively dressed, too. He saw people, young and middle-aged, go in and come out, carrying whatever they wanted.

He could not really believe all this.

He saw two children probably about ten, go into a sweetshop, and caught a glimpse of them helping themselves. They came out, without paying.

He said in a dry voice: "So you have done away with thieving."

Rita laughed.

"You can't steal your own goods! This really *is* community life, Neil. We have no money, no currency or coinage. What there is, all can have. No one has too much, because it wouldn't be fair. Now and again individuals have tried to get more than their share, but they didn't try for long."

"So you've a prison."

He wanted to hurt her, wanted to spoil the picture that she was drawing for him, but she seemed impervious to sarcasm; if in fact she noticed it.

"We haven't, as a matter of fact. A man did start taking too much, a month ago. We just had a meeting of his district or commune, the facts were stated, he was told not to do it again. He didn't! Somehow, one doesn't. I know it takes an awful lot to believe, but we're creating a perfect society. The kind of society the Christians and some humanists have believed in but practical men like Palfrey have always thought impossible. He *does* think that, you know."

Banister said stiffly: "Does he?"

"He may not say he does, but he can't really believe in perfection, like this. I didn't, until I experienced it. Yet I'm sorry that we clashed with him," Rita went on. "I like Palfrey, and he has quite a personality. We could use him here."

Banister said dryly: "I've no doubt you could," and suddenly found that he felt better.

"We may get him, yet," Rita said. "That's up to you."

She walked on . . .

People with white faces, black faces and yellow faces moved about the streets, went in and out of the shops, to three cinemas, the schools, the lecture halls, the workshops, factories and the private houses. They were all dressed very simply, the men with shirts and shorts, khaki, cream or white, and the women in simple dresses but of no uniform colour. Red, yellow and green were most popular. The common factor which Banister saw himself, and which Rita carefully avoided mentioning, was the glow of health which shone in the eyes and on the faces of all the people. They walked with a great confidence; like members of a master race. Even the children.

There were crèches . . .

"One crèche for every fifty families," Rita explained. "We find that the family is the best unit, after all, although we have very simple divorce laws. Oddly enough, they're seldom exercised, people who are happy and content don't want to leave their partners. That's if they have something to do to keep them busy! We've none of the usual stresses of daily life. The children

are put into the nurseries and later in nursery school, the parents have them home when they want them. Every adult has to work at least six hours a day."

She went on and on . . .

Banister found himself reeling under the impact of the things he saw; felt a new kind of horror.

This could not be real, but some dreadful nightmare, an awful illusion, a mirage which would surely fade. Here was a picture of perfection, a mockery of perfection, made by people who could kill without compunction.

Forget that!

When he remembered their readiness to kill, it clothed them and this dream-world in reality. It couldn't be real. They must have doped him. The voluptuous illusions of hashish, marihuana or opium must be conjuring up these mind pictures. Black, white and yellow didn't live together in perfect amity anywhere in the world. Black, white and yellow children, olive-skinned children . . .

"And of course, mixed marriages are common," Rita said. "They're more common than marriages between people of the same colour here. The result is a kind of coffee-coloured race. Klim says that the future—"

A child came running out of a shop.

"Oh, Miss Rita!"

"Yes, Rose?"

"Klim wants you," said the child, "he's just asked for you on the video screen."

"Oh, my goodness, it's after five," Rita exclaimed. "We mustn't keep Klim waiting."

That was the first note of uneasiness which had crept into her voice; the first thing to suggest anything but serene contentment in this city within the mountains, this world that was out of the world.

"Hurry, Neil," she begged.

Or Klim would be displeased . . .

Chapter 13

Klim did not appear to be displeased. He stood by himself in the room where Banister had first been. The strength of his features had not appeared so outstanding to Banister before, but he remembered what an impression that man had made when he had entered the house in Rotorua.

It was easy to imagine him as a kind of dictator, an all-powerful being. Banister sensed that, although Rita hadn't said so; probably no one would ever say so, because that would suggest that there was a blemish upon perfection.

"Hallo, Rita," Klim said, and nodded to Banister. "You're looking better already," he added. "I'm sorry I had to hurry you. I have to go to Miracle Ridge today." That was for Rita. "I shan't be back for three or four days. That will give Banister time to settle down, and you can give him anything he wants."

Rita said: "Very well."

"What's the matter?" Klim asked, almost sharply.

"Nothing."

"Of course there is – why did you look like that?"

"Why must you go to Miracle Ridge?" Rita asked.

"My dear, I've told you before that you're too soft-hearted," Klim said. "I think Banister would understand more readily than you do, in some ways!" He actually frowned. "Rita, you *must* rid yourself of these old-fashioned ideas. We had to get rid of a small town at the foot of the range on the Mato Grosso in South America. They were only peons, virtually savages. This ridiculous nonsense about the equality of human beings, about the sanctity —" He broke off. "Never mind. Banister, you will have to submit yourself to thorough medical examination – after that, you can go where you like."

Banister didn't speak.

"How did you become immune to *fatalis?*" Klim asked, abruptly.

"It's a natural immunity," Banister said.

"We shall find out," Klim told him, then turned away; he didn't say good-bye.

The door swung after him, kept swinging, and then slowly settled down. Neither of the people left in the room moved.

"The perfect world," Banister said, at last.

Rita looked into his eyes, with pain in hers.

"It is—it can be," she said. "It can—" She broke off.

She looked about her, and he saw that she stared mostly at the television screen. "Of course it is," she said abruptly, and he had a feeling that she had forced herself to alter what she had been going to say.

She was frightened; no matter how she might deny it, *she* was frightened.

Banister didn't speak.

"I am third in command here," Rita said suddenly, fiercely. "There are a number of cities. Miracle Ridge is one not far away. The others are—"

A sharp sound came from the television.

Rita caught her breath as she looked towards it, then went on in a voice which wasn't so calm but was quite steady: "The others are in different parts of the world. When Klim gets back, he will probably tell you more about them. They're really key cities, of course – eventually, they will be the capitals of the different provinces. Each is well-nigh impregnable. When we began, we weren't very strong. An armed movement against us might have succeeded. There's no danger of that, now. We could release flies, birds, animals, anything we like, among armies. Death would strike quickly. We know how to make certain creatures carriers during a limited period of immunity. They die, eventually. We can defeat any army—but we aren't quite ready to take over."

Banister said stonily: "Take what over?"

"The world," she said.

There it was, in all its naked clarity, all its madness. Here was the evidence which Palfrey sought, which justified Palfrey's belief that there was a deadly threat to mankind.

They "weren't quite ready" to take over the world!

"Compare ordinary people with us, Neil. Then you'll see that we're creating a race of supermen. There'll be no room for the oddities, for misshapen creatures, for fools, for the ailing. That's all we're trying to do – make people perfect."

She stopped.

"There's nothing I'd like better," Banister said. He took her arms suddenly, savagely. "But murder's a blot on perfection, can't you get that into your head? How on earth you let them blind you to—"

He kissed her fiercely.

She didn't relax, didn't move, didn't resist.

He pushed her away from him.

Then the door opened, and another woman came in. She was young, and – different. In her beauty, and she was lovely, there was a hint of something unfamiliar – she was probably of mixed blood. She moved easily, and had something of the gaiety of Marion.

"I don't want to interfere," she said in a voice that was slightly husky, "but some of us thought that Neil might like to come and join us."

There was a pause.

Banister sensed the strain between the two women. No word had been said, nothing in the way they looked at each other suggested strain, but there it was.

"That's a good idea," Rita said. "All right, Sophie, we'll come right away."

Three days later, Banister knew that he was watched all the time, wherever he was; and that others were watched, too. There was no solitude. It grew upon him, slowly at first, that there was little real naturalness – except round the meal tables when groups talked freely about ideas and ideologies, always with sneering reference to the other world "below". For the rest,

everyone was careful what they said, what they did; careful of the very expressions on their faces.

Rita was.

Sophie was.

Even a lank-haired man who often talked about being impatient, of wanting to "finish" the other world, seemed to be talking for effect; behaving as a man would if he knew that secret eyes were upon him every minute.

Banister was watched, then – whether he was alone, or with Rita or with a crowd; eyes followed him. He was not told the result of the medical examination; he assumed that they were satisfied that he had a natural immunity, but he couldn't be sure.

On the fourth day a strange and ugly thing happened.

The day began smoothly. If anything, Banister felt a little better than he had. Rita hummed to herself when she sat working over some figures in the big room, with a typewriter beside her. Sophie wasn't there.

The television screen flickered.

They looked up at it; and Banister began to realise how quickly he had come to accept this as a part of daily life. There were no telephones, and the personal television operated smoothly; each screen had its own wavelength, and messages for one individual were not shown on all screens but general messages could be shone on them all at the same time.

"Rita," a man said, and Banister recognised Klim.

It didn't disturb her. She moved towards the screen and pressed a button.

"Hallo, Klim, how are you?" It was almost as if she were speaking in the same room.

"I'm all right. I hope to be back tonight. We're anxious to see how Project Ninety-seven is going. Find out and report back as soon as you can, will you?"

"Yes, Klim. May I take Neil?"

"Please yourself," Klim said. " 'Bye."

His picture faded from the screen.

"There aren't many places here you haven't seen yet," Rita said, getting away from the screen and picking up her handbag. "This will interest you, Neil."

"Good."

"Let's go."

There was no doubt that she was calmer in spirit than she had been for several days. They walked briskly along the streets, which were now becoming familiar; so were people. Men and women Banister knew by sight nodded and smiled; some of the people whom he knew by name would come upon him unexpectedly, nod or smile, and say: "Hallo, Neil."

He had become accepted.

They turned a corner when the lank-haired man came from the other direction. He was the only one Banister had met here whom he actively disliked. That was partly because of the other's overbearing manner. He had

a long, sallow face with hollow cheeks, and looked less healthy than most of the people in the fastness. His eyes were almost black, always shiny. His lips were thin, and most of the time were curled sardonically. There was always the bite of sarcasm in his voice.

He ignored Banister.

"Hey, Rita, where's Sophie?"

"She's gone to Miracle Ridge."

"Why the hell don't people *tell* me these things?" growled the lank-haired man.

He pushed past them.

They went through a swing door which Neil hadn't seen before, at the extreme end of one of the smaller private roads, where the flat-topped, single-storey houses stood side by side like a model of a model settlement.

They entered a narrow street – more like an alley than a street, lit by the same unending and unvarying daylight. This was a world without sun but with sunlight; without clouds or rain, snow or hail, without mist, without wind.

Several doors led off to the right and the left; and these had locks. Banister was touched with an unexpected excitement.

Rita stopped halfway along the alley.

"This will do," she said, "we'll change halfway."

"Change?"

"We want to go up to factory and laboratory level," she told him, "and we have to use the elevators. None going straight to the laboratory we want is free."

She pressed a button by a door. It slid open. They stepped into a small elevator, panelled in plastic, and the door slid to behind them. They started to go up, and Banister could not judge their speed, because he had nothing to judge by. The uncanny feeling that he had felt when he had first arrived here came back; there was a sense of eeriness, too. This was a shaft driven through a high mountain – and if each door led to a lift or elevator, then there were at least a dozen shafts.

They stopped, and the door slid open.

They stepped forward – and Banister caught his breath sharply.

There was a great window opposite the lift doors, and for the first time since he had arrived, he saw outside. It was a moment of exaltation; for here was grandeur and beauty and a strange, compelling sense of silence and of mystery.

They looked out upon the great peaks and the soft, embracing snow, all lit by the sun. Colours from the snow crystals touched the whiteness, soft and gentle shades that did not jar the eye. The peaks and rocks and jagged crevices showed dark and yet, somehow, they were made soft.

The snow had stopped and the cloud had gone, there was the pristine blueness of the sky, with the peaks etched against them. On a slope not far away, people were skiing – several dozen of them, men, women and children. Against a frowning ledge of rock there was a mountain chalet; this

might have been part of Switzerland. Beyond the ski run and the chalet and the softness of that valley there were taller peaks and, between them, the sluggish, gigantic might of glaciers.

"Breath-taking, isn't it?" Rita said, softly.

Banister spoke without thinking.

"Perfect."

He felt the touch of her hand upon his arm, and a gentle pressure. She didn't speak, but could not have said more clearly: "I told you so."

He turned away from the window. They were in a kind of hallway, with doors leading in all directions. A green light glowed at one of the other lift shafts. Rita pressed the button, and the same thing happened. They were taken upwards. Now he had a mental image of the snow scene in his mind's eye; and sight of Rita, looking as if she felt vindicated at last, looking more carefree than she had for days.

The lift stopped; they went out, thrust open a door which had a lighted sign reading: *Project 97*, above it.

They went in.

It was a small laboratory. Banister recognised it as being up to date – stream-lined as it were – and very tidy. Several young people in white smocks stood about; obviously assistants. Behind a glass partition in one corner sat a man in a white coat and with white hair – and that gave Banister a shock.

He had seen no one so old since he had arrived here.

Standing over the white-haired man was a younger one. They were talking.

As Rita took Banister forward, the younger man banged the desk.

The white-haired man jumped up.

The glass walls cut off the sound, but obviously they were quarrelling.

"Stay here," Rita said, and hurried forward.

Banister had no idea what she hoped to do. He knew that whatever it was, she was too late. The door opened before she reached it, the white-haired man thrust the younger aside and came striding out.

An assistant moved forward.

Banister saw his hand go out, saw the flash – and saw the white-haired man fall.

Chapter 14

Banister didn't move.

All the horror he had felt at Rotorua came back to him. Here or there, in this world or the other, it was the same: sudden death; murder.

The younger man came out of the partitioned room.

"Take him away," he said casually to the attendant who had touched the grey-haired man. "I'll see him when he comes round." He was a tall, lean-faced, healthy-looking man with practically no hair, a round mouth and round, strangely innocent-looking eyes. "Hallo, Rita, I'm sorry about that."

"What happened?"

"Klim was on the television this morning, Wanting quicker results. Old Prof Nottley wouldn't play. He said that he wasn't going to rush experiments for me, you or Klim! Then he said he would destroy the experiment, and—we've had 'em like that before, I thought we'd better not take the chances."

"No," said Rita, slowly. "You were quite right."

The young man smiled at Banister.

"Hallo, Banister – I've been hoping we could have a chat before long. It would be nice to hear what London's looking like! I haven't been there for six years."

Banister said: "London is looking about the same as it was when you people started this murder game, and as it will look a hundred years from now." His voice was very thin; cold. "So you kill them off here too, Rita."

"Kill?" echoed the young man. "Nottley's not dead. We didn't give him a full dose. We're getting on top of this thing now – can regulate the dose, so to speak."

"Kill or maim," Banister said bitterly.

"Neil, don't jump to conclusions," Rita broke in. "There has to be discipline, and—"

"Oh, discipline for aye!" said the young scientist, with an edge to his laughter. "Plenty of that. He's all right, Banister – we just put him to sleep for a few hours. It's a strain for these older chaps. Mistake to bring 'em, I always think."

"I'll believe he's alive when I can see him breathing," Banister growled.

Rita began: "Neil, don't—"

She stopped abruptly, deeply troubled again. She looked up, intuitively. High on the wall, close to the ceiling, there was a glowing television screen; she knew that she was being watched. She seemed to fight for self-possession, for the right expression on her face.

She succeeded, looking much calmer.

"We'll show him, Mick."

"Right!"

The scientist led the way to the door through which the white-haired man had been carried. There was a narrow passage, then another room, with several easy-chairs, couches, tables, magazines – this was a kind of rest-

room. Professor Nottley lay on one of the couches, looking completely relaxed. Banister had only to watch him for a few seconds to know that he was alive.

"Come and have a look round now you're here," said the man named Mick.

He turned towards another door, and opened it. This, like the others here, had a lock; but the key was not turned in this one. Mick stepped through.

Rita exclaimed: "Mick!"

Banister was just behind the young man, and saw over his shoulder. He stood quite still. So did Mick – until he backed away abruptly, and closed the door. He turned round, looking startled and shaken.

"Sorry, Rita," he mumbled. "I must be crazy."

Rita didn't speak.

"I meant *this* door," Mick said, and moved quickly towards another door.

Passing Banister, he looked at him; something in his eyes was different from anything Banister had seen in anyone in this place. It was a conspiratorial, yet a questioning look; it told Banister that the door hadn't been opened by accident, but intentionally – to give him a glimpse of what was inside.

Banister could still picture that . . .

Beyond the door which Mick had opened was a chamber, a kind of tunnel; inside this were old men and women, dozens of old men and women, labouring; working until the sweat ran off their backs and scraggy chests. They dug and they shovelled – drilling holes in the solid rock. It was as if the centuries had been rolled back, and there were the horrors of the Middle Ages; or as if the pages of the years had turned, and there were the forced labourers of Hitler's regime, working, sweating, dropping, dying.

Banister had seen the old men, working.

He had seen the old women, also.

Old men and old women, naked to the waist, slaving, digging, tunnelling, handling the picks, handling the pneumatic drills; with a man with a whip standing over them.

"You see, what we're doing here is a development of jet-propulsion," the young man named Mick said. He spoke breathlessly, as if he were still trying to cover up his "error". "Speed's relative, of course. These midget aeroplanes can travel at a thousand miles an hour. They're not really 'planes , as you know them down below – more like engines with a light framework or fuselage. The aero-suits we've developed for people dispense with the need for fuselage as it's known down there.

"We use these machines regularly," he went on. "Klim's travelled in one this time. They seat two, even three at a pinch. By flying very high, they don't make any recognisable sound down below. People there think it's freak thunder. The beauty is their range – they can fly round the world without stopping, yet can land on a postage stamp. Well, more or less!" Mick

laughed – and it sounded like a nervous laugh. “Nottley was one of the great back-room boys of jet propulsion. Came here three years ago—”

Banister could almost see the headline in the newspapers now:

SCIENTIST DISAPPEARS
Jet-propulsion Pioneer
Search for Professor Julian Nottley

“I thought you’d recognise him,” Mick said. “Well, he’s one of many who have—er *volunteered* to come and help us.”

There was no mistaking his emphasis on the word volunteered – “you and you and you”. Banister recalled the Army chestnut, knew that Mick was really saying: “Nottley didn’t volunteer, he was forced to come here.” Mick’s round, grey eyes were bright, in that moment, and the hint of nervousness disappeared.

It soon came back.

“Down below, they’ve only just started to cope with the problems of space and distance. But we’re really making progress. Still, we have nearly all the best brains, and one *volunteer’s* worth ten conscripts. I’m sure you agree.” He went off jerkily again. “We tackle both the stratosphere and the deep oceans. In many ways ocean travel is more secure than air travel – got its limitations, of course. Thing we’re looking for, my particular baby, is one that can both fly *and* travel fast under water. Haven’t quite got there yet. I —”

A television screen flickered.

“Is Miss Rita there?” a girl asked. “If she could come to the office as soon as possible, please.”

Rita touched the adjacent switch.

“I’m coming—I’m in Project Ninety-seven at the moment.”

“Thank you, Miss Rita.”

The screen went dead.

“Neil—”

“Sorry you can’t stay longer,” said the man named Mick. “See you some time. Skiing, perhaps – winter sports all the year round.”

He grinned.

He mouthed at Banister: “Two o’clock today.”

Rita led the way outside, down the lift, along the street to her room. They didn’t speak. She knew what Banister had seen, and would realise that he would never accept it as part of goodness. But for one thing, he would have been in a fury of agitation.

What had Mick been trying to tell him?

“Two o’clock today – skiing – volunteers who were nothing of the kind . . .”

Two people were waiting to see Rita. Neil went into his own room, and looked up at the blank television screen. It could glow at any moment, and he was aware that from the moment it glowed, he could be seen by whoever

was looking in; seen and overheard. There wasn't a moment when they were really secure from everyone else, and yet Mick had talked.

The door opened.

"Neil," Rita said abruptly, "don't tell a soul what you saw. Put it right out of your mind. If they thought you'd seen that, you wouldn't have a chance."

Banister said heavily: "I can understand that. What I can't understand is you."

"Never mind that," she said. "Just forget it."

"I'm suffocated in here," Banister growled. "I can't breathe properly. The whole place is driving me mad. I feel as if the walls are going to fall in on me, if I don't get out I *will* go mad."

"It's often like that when you first come," Rita said desperately. "It's a kind of claustrophobia, but it soon goes. You'll be all right."

"I've got to get *out*," Banister growled. "I've got to breathe some fresh air. Seeing that out of the window this morning did it, I hadn't realised how much I was missing."

"I'll see if I can arrange for you to go out," Rita promised.

She did not say from whom permission came; but it came.

At two o'clock Banister went out of the mountain city, into the brittle sunlight of the mountains. He wore fur-lined clothes, and found that he could move more freely than when he had first arrived. The sun was warm. A few other people were about, and most of them waved to him. He carried skis over his shoulder as he went towards the run – probably the one which he had seen from the window.

He came within sight of the chalet.

Mick was there with a young woman in a red beret, and with two small children, a boy and a girl. They were just beginning to ski, and Mick and the woman had chosen a gentle slope. The boy had a chubby face and round eyes, which marked him as Mick's son beyond doubt. He was starting down on his own, obviously for the first time. The girl clung tightly to the woman's hand.

"Don't be scared," Mick said to the boy, "do it the way I showed you."

The child began to lever himself forward, then gradually moved of his own volition. A spark of fear showed in his blue eyes; then that faded. As he kept his balance, confidence came, and with confidence the excitement of success. He slid downwards thirty or forty feet before he toppled over. Mick ran towards him and picked him up. The boy was laughing delightedly; the girl began to laugh.

"You try with Meg," called Mick to the woman.

He glanced up and saw Neil, nodded, and then turned back to the boy.

Neil went to the top of a run, where a dozen people were standing. A few were already on the way downwards, graceful figures, swinging this way or that as they swerved past outcrops of rock and stunted trees and great mounds of snow. It was a year since he had been on skis.

He felt the first rush of wind, of exhilaration, of excitement.

He started a run.

It was good. It was even good to be alive. The nightmare figures that he had seen seemed to fade. There was speed and the rush of the wind past his cheeks, of the wind-pressure against his body. He felt as if he were on top of the world, as if nothing could go wrong.

At last, he came to a standstill. No one seemed to be near in this great sloping field of virgin white. He turned and looked up at the peaks towering above him. One was near, and others were in the distance, a world of mountain-tops and snow and bright-blue sky. Crags overhung the valley. A few skiers were coming down, one tumbled suddenly and disappeared in a flurry of snow.

Banister started the long climb back.

The quickest way, he thought, was to cut behind some outcrops which were overhung with snow on one side. That cut him off from sight of the people up near the chalet; but they were so far away that they could only see him clearly with glasses, anyhow.

He reached the outcrop.

He saw a movement where the snow seemed to heave as if under some great convulsion, but it wasn't that, it was a man who appeared from the depths of the snow, a drift which had looked impenetrable.

"Hallo," said the man named Mick.

"Next time, why don't you frighten me to death?" Banister managed to say.

Mick grinned.

"Don't want you dead! Listen. I've only four or five minutes. I came down through a shaft we've driven from behind the chalet. Only a few of us know about it—I hope! This is probably the one place in High Peak where we can talk without being seen or heard." He drew a deep breath. "You *are* a Palfrey man, aren't you?"

Banister said abruptly: "Yes."

"Brought here by force?"

"Yes." Banister sensed the need for urgency, also sensed the kind of thing that Mick wanted to know. There was urgent fear in the back of his mind; that this might be a trick to encourage him to think that there were rebels at High Peak. He had to make a decision swiftly, and this one didn't take long. "I'm a neophyte, for conversion – they hope."

"Any luck?"

"I'm not impressed."

"All right," Mick said. "I'm taking my life in my hands in trusting you. Heard you were a Palfrey man, never known one of those who couldn't be trusted. There are about twenty of us, planning a break."

"When?"

"As soon as we can. This year—next year. Never mind *when*."

"It matters."

"Why the urgency?"

"They're killing too freely."

"Tell me."

"Death on contact with the hand, arm, anything – they've wiped out several villages. They're using it as a form of blackmail."

"That's Anak," Mick said. His eyes looked hard, his mouth set for a moment; he appeared to forget that time was precious; he seemed suddenly to be much older than he was. "He's deadly. I can't help it, yet. We might manage it next month, but it might take longer."

"Where are we?"

"Antarctica."

"Sure?"

"Positive. Listen. We're assembling Project Ninety-one – that's a faster-than-sound aircraft that can carry three – in the secret shaft. We sneak a piece out at a time, with a little fuel. Trouble will come when we start to leave – we'll have to be out of reach of Klim, Anak, of anyone. I won't go into details. Take it from me, we're all getting ready to go."

"Why all?"

"You crazy?" Mick asked, sharply.

"No."

"I don't understand you."

"Three could get away, but the others should stay – they'd become a useful fifth column later," Banister said.

"It *might* work. I'll see." Mick was very earnest. After a pause, he went on: "We can't talk much longer. Anak is the king-pin – you'll soon meet him. Klim's only in charge at High Peak. Try to fool Anak, make him believe you're falling for the idiocy. If you can fool him you might get a chance to do something really worthwhile."

Mick spoke very quickly, his round face solemn – anxious.

"Time's up," he added. "I won't name anyone else. We'll identify ourselves when necessary." He gave a twisted smile. "I hope we can trust you!"

Banister didn't speak.

"Those men you saw today making the new shafts," Mick said. "Old and not so old. They're what Klim and Anak call traitors. People who have been press-ganged to come here, and refuse to work. Or men who were to be converted and to go and spread the gospel down below. Or men like me, who realised that it's all a hideous sham. If this is perfection, give me good, wholesome corruption! Neil—"

"Yes?"

"Be careful of Rita. *Very* careful. The serpent in the new Eden. Sometimes I think she has good impulses, but Klim and Anak overcome them for her. Don't trust her with a word. And Neil – if I get caught, you, any one of us, the horror of punishment would make Belsen seem a pleasure." His grin was very taut. "Last thing – they're very interested in you as a naturally immune subject. They know that Palfrey might have discovered a way to make you immune, of course – and they'll want to find out whether he has or whether you're a natural. Watch your step – if Anak believes you've been insulated,

you'll be in bad. Now – off you go. Hurry – they'll know you've been a long time. They'll soon send scouts down for you. You're watched all the time."

"I know."

"Another last thing," Mick said. "I made a deadly mistake when I opened that wrong door. Intentionally." He didn't smile now. "I hoped Rita wouldn't see what I'd done. If she reports it to Klim or Anak, then I've had it. Don't be surprised if I just disappear."

Banister felt constriction at his throat.

"All—right."

"Off with you," Mick said.

He turned and walked between two rocks, and disappeared. The snow closed behind him. Where he had been there was only the crystal clear air with the blue sky above, and the brilliance of the snow dimming with the setting of the sun.

Banister hurried up the slope.

As he passed the outcrop and came within sight of the chalet again, he saw two men speeding down towards him.

Chapter 15

Banister made his way slowly towards the skiers. He did not recognise either of them. He tried to stop his heart from thumping with wild fear, but could not. It was as if death were winging towards him on the air.

They drew level, passed, and swung round, swerving skilfully and breaking their downward plunge. Next moment they were plodding along on either side of him. He did not recognise them. Both were youngish men, bright-eyed, with all the outward excellence of men who lived here.

"We thought you'd got lost," one said.

"I was tired."

"Dangerous thing, to rest out here on your own."

"I know. I tried a short cut. I won't again – it was too steep." "Snow's too deep, too. I certainly shouldn't do it again." They plodded on, in silence; then: "Did you see anyone?"

"No."

"No one at all?"

The man made the question sound like a threat; he seemed to be saying: "You're lying, we know you're lying, now tell the truth."

Perhaps Mick was wrong; perhaps there was an all-seeing eye.

"No – the others swerved off to the right," Banister said. "Is that the best run?"

"Yes."

They didn't ask any more questions; it might have been because they were breathless. So was he. At the top of the run, he felt as if he could collapse. He went into the chalet. There was no sign outside of Mick's wife or the two children; but they were inside, sitting at a table where a dozen other children and two or three women appeared to be giving a party.

Then Mick appeared, in one of the ordinary khaki-drill suits of the city itself; smiling; apparently untroubled. Banister didn't ask himself how he had contrived to get back so quickly; didn't ask or answer any unspoken question; but he understood the look in Mick's eyes.

Mick wanted to know if all was well.

Did he?

If he were genuine, would he have taken such a chance of confiding in a man known to be a close associate of Rita?

How Mick *hated* Rita – if he could be taken at his word.

"Enjoy it?" Rita asked, when Banister was back.

"Very much."

"Feel better?"

"I think so."

"You must," Rita said. "Klim and Anak are coming back tonight. They'll want to see you. There's been some trouble, I don't quite know what it is. Be reasonable with them."

"I'll try! Who is Anak?"

If he didn't ask, she might wonder how he knew the name. "Our leader," she answered.

"I thought Klim—"

"He is in command here at High Peak. Anak is the leader everywhere." She glanced at the dull, silent television screen. "Anak wants to send a message to Palfrey, and I think he will choose you as messenger. Don't do anything that might antagonise him. He's—"

She hesitated.

The television screen flickered.

"He's coming tonight," she said, and changed the subject smoothly. It was a consolation to know that they could always tell when they were being watched; a dead or dull screen meant reasonable safety. "Enjoy it in the snow?"

"Very much."

The screen went dull, a little later. Rita spoke as if there had been no interruption in their original conversation.

"Anak is sometimes both domineering and impatient."

"Der Führer?"

"*You* might think so. He's—he is the brain behind it all. The perfect man." She said that almost as if she were in a coma. She repeated it, looking towards the screen – and it began to flicker: "The perfect man, Neil. You must come to believe that, to realise the good we're doing."

The screen became dull again, five minutes later.

She said: "I told you down below – I'm in love with you. So deeply." Her voice seemed to tell him that it was true; yet he saw Mick's face and heard Mick's warning again. "I dread to think that anything might happen to you. Be careful – don't upset Anak, don't annoy him."

Banister said: "I'll try not to."

The television screen flickered, and this time it went very bright. It was not simply that someone was looking and listening-in; someone was getting in touch with Rita.

"Hallo, Rita." That was Klim.

"Hallo, Klim."

The man's face appeared on the screen suddenly; and there was another beside him. Banister found himself looking into the face of a man who seemed to dominate the screen; who made Klim look a weakling. The face itself was so regular, strong, aggressive; if an Epstein were to carve a composite face of all men of good looks, it would be like this – hard, rugged, handsome, with a dominating nose, thick black eyebrows, compelling eyes.

Banister felt the fingers of fear again . . .

"Take Banister to Hall Three," Klim said.

"Now?"

"Yes. Anak wants to see him."

The other man was Anak, of course, but he didn't speak.

This time, they went in the opposite direction to the one they had taken when they had gone to the factory and laboratory levels. They reached the end of a wide street, then turned down a narrow alley, and came to a large square, where there were several larger buildings. These were the cinemas, theatres and lecture halls. Two or three men were about, busying themselves at the entrances, but that was all.

The doorway of Hall Three was at a corner.

Two men stood outside, dressed in exactly the same way as the others in High Peak, but they were like guards; bodyguards. They were not armed, but guards would need no weapons where a touch of the hand could kill.

A man on duty at the swing door bowed slightly and opened it; that was the first sign of obsequiousness that Banister had seen.

They went into a dimly lighted hall. It was large enough for five hundred people or more, but only a dozen or so were present, all seated at the back.

A shadowy figure approached Banister and Rita.

"Will you please sit down – Anak will see you afterwards."

"Very well," Rita said.

They sat down in comfortable chairs; foam-rubber cinema seats, which tilted slightly. It was warm – the same even temperature that seemed to be general everywhere within the mountain fastness. There was a moment of silence, then a man's voice came, speaking very clearly in English; a slow and deliberate voice.

"You are about to see actual pictures taken three days ago, on the nineteenth of November, of incidents which took place in Kelsingham, a small town in the Cotswold country of England. Kelsingham was the home of Professor Morris-Jones, whose services were required by the Upper World. A man named Bruton, an American—"

Banister felt a shock, as if he had been touched by an electric current.

"—was for some reason not yet known with Professor Morris-Jones at the time that he was due to leave his home. Bruton, who works with the now notorious Dr. Palfrey, appeared to have some prior knowledge of the journey planned for Morris-Jones. Bruton had arranged for the home of the Professor to be closely guarded.

"Project Thirty-nine was used," went on the man with the slow, deliberate voice, "this time through the medium of a cat. The effect you will see . . ."

The voice faded into nothing.

There was silence; yet Banister's flesh crawled.

Then pictures came on the large cine-screen. They were in black and white, but very clear and three-dimensional; it was as if they were sitting and looking at the actual scene. Shots of the Cotswolds, the trees bare and dark against a cloudy sky, shorn even of the last leaves of autumn. A long, low house of Cotswold stone, with mullioned windows – part of a world that might have been a million miles away from here.

Men were moving about outside; five or six of them. Bruton appeared, stepping out of a car which drew up slowly; he walked briskly to the front door. He was exactly the same as when Banister had last seen him, had

much of the familiar brisk confidence. He knocked at the door and turned and smiled, as if he knew that a camera was focused on him.

Rita leaned forward and whispered: "We have developed automatic cameras which can be placed wherever we wish, and are subject to remote control."

Banister squeezed her knee, as he would, perhaps, in any cinema when he didn't want to speak.

Her hand slid into his.

The door of the house of Cotswold stone opened, and Bruton went in.

Until that moment, the film had been silent. Now sounds came, soft at first, and far away. The engine of a car. Voices. Footsteps. A man came into sight, walking slowly. He was one of the guards. There was a close-up of him, of his big, good-looking face; he showed a kind of confidence.

There was a long shot – of a cat.

Banister felt Rita's hand tight in his.

It was a black cat, just a black cat, which appeared, slinking, round the corner of the garden wall.

Then: "Hallo, puss."

The cat drew nearer the man. Another close-up showed its eyes, expressionless, glowing; and its whiskers, its mouth.

It opened its mouth. "*Miaou.*"

The shot changed. The man was approaching the cat, which stood quite still, back slightly arched, staring up. The man's fingers were long and broad and strong.

The fingers drew nearer the furry head.

They touched . . .

Light flashed, and lit up the hall; showed the few people sitting there in sharp, clear silhouettes. It blinded them; and when the light faded and they could see, the cat wasn't there and the man lay dead. Not writhing, not unconscious, not in pain – just still and dead.

Then the feet of other men were shown, approaching cautiously; and the men drew round the body in a circle, faces were shown, with all the horror reflected on them. Footsteps, heavy breathing, opening doors, a man running, calling:

"Be careful, don't touch—*mind that cat!*"

"Cat!" one of the men near the body called.

"*Cat!*"

They scrambled away, for safety – but there was no safety. The cat leapt and touched one, just brushed against him; and there was a flash and he fell.

The screen and the hall seemed to be lit up by a series of flashes.

Banister was rigid in his seat; felt as if he would never be able to move again. It was like lightning striking, vicious, merciless, caring not whom it struck down.

It faded.

There lay five dead men – and Bruton, alive, staring at them with his lips parted, as if the horror had paralysed him. He looked from face to face. He

stared along the street towards the distant hills, the hedges, the square stone chimneys – and towards the cat, which turned round the corner. He began to run—

He fell.

Banister could not tell what struck him, but he saw a car draw up, and men hurry into the house; and come out, very soon, holding a man between them, an elderly man who struggled in their grasp and looked frightened and indignant; and then simply shocked at sight of the dead men. He was hustled into the car; its engine sounded loud as it moved off.

There was a different noise, inside the hall; a kind of moaning. It affected Banister more than anything had yet. He looked about him, but could not see where it came from, yet it came again.

Rita clenched his hand tightly, her fingers dug into his.

The film went on – showing long shots of the cat, that was all. It walked along the street, and the suspense was agonising. A cyclist passed, a boy, whistling; he stopped: "Hi, puss!"

The cat stalked on. An old woman came slowly along the street, and looked at it, smiling, fond, so sweet and kind. She held out her hand. The cat stopped and looked at her.

"Pretty pussy – come here, pretty pussy."

Banister heard that groaning again; as if there were someone in this hall terrified and in great pain; or anguish. Yet even that could not distract his attention now. He watched the cat, which watched the old woman who tried to attract it; and then it stalked past her.

She disappeared.

A child came running out of a house; its footsteps pattering. A woman's voice sounded: "*Betty, don't go into the road!*"

The woman appeared, alarm on her face – the look of fear that a mother would have for a child in danger. But the child stopped.

"Puthy," she lisped. "Puthy."

"Oh, thank goodness," the mother exclaimed. The car passed, at a fast speed. "Betty, you mustn't run into the road, I shall be very cross with you if you do, Betty!"

"Puthy . . . puthy." The child had fair ringlets and big eyes.

"I don't like you playing with strange cats, either, but just pat him, then, and—"

The groaning stopped; and there came a scream which cut through Banister, made him turn and stare towards the little group of people sitting near. It was a man, screaming. He was trying to get up, but others were pulling him down.

The film went on.

"Puthy—" the child lisped.

A tiny hand drew near and then touched the black fur; and a blinding flash lit up the hall.

The man here screamed again.

The hall went dark.

Then the mother appeared on the screen, staring incredulously, too shocked to show horror. Her face was set in lines of astonishment, of disbelief, until gradually dread crept upon her, and she rushed forward, went on her knees to gather up her child.

Flash!

"I cannot stand it, I cannot see any more!"

The man in the hall screamed and jumped up again and tried to get out of his seat. He was pushed down. The scuffling sounds ceased; there was silence – while on the screen the black cat walked along the wide street and then along the pavement and into a busy thoroughfare. The cat walked along among the people, touching none – but every time a leg or hand drew near it, Banister felt the horror – and the man screamed again.

A dog appeared.

Cat and dog stared at each other, the dog's back bristling, the cat arching its back. The cat turned blindly, cannoned into a man in the queue—

The flash came—

From that moment a storm seemed to burst upon the town; flash after flash came as the victims and the cat fell upon each other, and as they touched, spread death. Still racing, the cat turned into a cinema and disappeared.

Soon two or three terrified people rushed out – only to stop and stare at the scene of desolation, at dying people; and to see the flashes.

Then a man's voice sounded above a car engine: "*Don't touch anyone, don't touch, don't touch!*"

It was Bruton.

"*If you touch them you'll die, don't touch—*"

Chapter 16

The screen went dark and the sound faded, but there was no real silence; only a kind of muttering, almost a gibberish. Then a light went on, its glow spreading and brightening, and gradually Banister felt that he was drawn away from the horror of what he had seen. He didn't move.

The others stood up. He recognised Klim – and a moment later, Anak. Everything he had thought about Anak on the screen was justified. There was a strange perfection of feature, a kind of aggressive handsomeness which went far beyond that: he seemed the personification of power, as if he knew quite well that no one in the world could compete with him.

Banister thought, even then: "A self-made *god*."

Two men half-lifted, half-dragged a third from his seat. The third man was elderly, grey-haired, dressed in dark clothes, an ordinary lounge suit. His eyes were closed; he had fainted. His face would have been unknown to Banister an hour before.

It was the man who had been taken away from the house in the Cotswolds; the prisoner whose capture had led to the horror that they had just seen.

Rita was pulling at Banister's arm. He got up. The old man was taken out. The others waited near the door. Banister felt the gaze of the man named Anak on him; the gaze of the Leader. The eyes were dark, and yet they glowed. There was no expression—

Ah!

That was the thing that was wrong about him, and in a lesser degree, it was wrong with Klim. They talked and behaved naturally, but they did not look natural. Their faces might have been carved out of some kind of stone; and every time they spoke or opened and closed their eyes or turned their heads, it was as if it were being done by a puppet-master who held invisible cords.

But these men were real.

"Anak," Klim said, "this is Banister."

"So I imagined," Anak said.

His voice was accentless and without expression; like his face. It was deep and not unpleasant. There was an edge of sarcasm in it, almost as if he were saying to Klim: "Whom else do you think I would expect to find here?" He looked Banister up and down, not insolently but in a way which would have been insolent in any other man.

"Did you learn the lesson, Banister?" he asked.

Banister didn't answer.

Anak frowned; that was little more than a movement of his thick, black eyebrows

"Did you learn the lesson?"

Rita touched Banister's arm; as if by accident. Actually, she was pleading with him to answer; she was desperately anxious, or pretended to be, that he

should not displease the Leader.

He said: “If you mean did I see the power of the *fatalis* – yes.”

“That is what I meant,” Anak said. “I understand that you have shown no grasp or understanding of scientific matters. Does that mean you only pretended to be a scientist?”

What purpose was there in lying now?

“Yes,” Banister said.

“How is it you are immune from *fatalis?*”

“It’s a natural immunity.” Banister felt his heart thumping. “I discovered it when I picked up the—” he hesitated, then decided to tell the truth—”the real Monk-Gilbert.”

“I think that is true. Our tests showed none of the blood and body content we would expect to find if you had been treated with an immunising agent.” Anak turned to Klim. “You see, Monk-Gilbert was killed.” To Banister, he said almost casually: “Why did you go about with a false Monk-Gilbert?”

“We hoped to find a source of *fatalis*.”

“Did you?”

“Yes – in New Zealand.”

Anak looked at him intently. Banister felt his heart thumping fiercer because of fear that he would not be believed.

Then Anak said abruptly: “We will go and talk to Morris-Jones.”

The scientist lay slumped back in a chair; he breathed through his open mouth with a faint whistling sound. He had a long, lean face with thick lips and a long chin. Near-white stubble bristled on his chin and cheeks. He wore a stiff collar, two or three sizes too large for him, and a black tie.

He looked very tired.

His hands looked old and somehow helpless as they drooped from the arms of his chair.

“I don’t think Morris-Jones will give us more trouble,” Anak said. “He has been very difficult. It is important that we should know what he has found out.”

“Of course,” said Klim.

“Perhaps Banister can help us,” Anak said. He turned to Banister, as Rita held a glass towards him. He took it, but didn’t drink. “Thank you, Rita. Banister, did you know that Morris-Jones was working on an insulating drug, to be injected into the bloodstream, to protect humans against the effect of what you so aptly call *fatalis?*”

“I knew someone was working on it, I didn’t know who,” Banister said.

“Do you know how far they’d got?”

“Not. far.”

“Can never be *quite* sure with Palfrey,” Anak said musingly. “He is sometimes more clever than we think – he gets results, doesn’t he? Anyhow, Morris-Jones will tell us just how far he succeeded. I can’t believe, I won’t believe, that it is beyond the experimental stage, even if Palfrey has found an insulating agent.”

His gaze fell on Banister again, hot with suspicion.

"*Are* you naturally immune? Or did Palfrey find a way—"

"Listen," Banister said, "I touched Monk-Gilbert, carried him over my shoulder, before I'd ever heard of Palfrey. Palfrey wanted to use me because I was immune. Nothing else made me valuable to him."

To his surprise, Anak was smiling faintly. "That agrees with what we know of you," he said mildly. "Now I believe that the laboratory at Morris-Jones's home was destroyed, but Palfrey might well have had someone else working with him, keeping in touch by telephone, perhaps, or radio – so that whatever results Morris-Jones obtained won't be lost. We *must* find that out."

He sipped his drink.

"Whisky-and-soda, Neil?" Rita said.

"I—thanks," Banister took a glass.

"Well, Banister," Anak said, as if he were changing the subject, and it wasn't really important, after all. "Now you see how *fatalis* can be used." He didn't smile. "Imagine the effect at a large cinema or in a crowded street in London or New York, Chicago – anywhere you like."

Banister said: "I don't think I want to."

"Squeamish?"

"You can call it that."

"I really can't understand you people," Anak said. He sounded almost impatient, and at the same time, mildly amused. "You seem to think that human life, with its span of seventy years, really matters. Compared with the past and the future and the purpose of life, it is negligible. A few people living in a little country town die. If you read that two or three hundred people died on the roads in England in any month of the year it wouldn't shock you. You'd still drive at seventy or eighty miles an hour if you got the chance, wouldn't you?"

Banister said slowly: "Yes, I suppose so."

It was the first moment that he felt that he might be able to fool Anak; the first moment of real hope. He experienced a sense of freedom such as he had not known since he had first met Palfrey.

Anak and Klim were looking at him very closely.

"Yes," Banister went on, more firmly. "I see what you mean."

He sipped the whisky.

"I should damned well think you do," Anak said warmly. "All this glutinous pretence at horror and sorrow sickens me. Those people were lucky, can't you see that? Listen to me." He went across to Banister, and stood in front of him; too close for comfort. "If we'd been able to take pictures inside those walls, what should we have seen? Old men and old women coughing their hearts up – dying by degrees but clinging to life as if it mattered. Young children, suffering, dying – from poliomyelitis, perhaps, or meningitis, or a dozen other diseases that medical science down there hasn't yet cured. If you can see the world as a world instead of as a number of loosely co-ordinated nations, you'd see much farther. The plague,

smallpox, yellow fever, yaws, all the diseases that are almost forgotten in Europe and the United States, are still common in the Middle East, India, China, in all the underdeveloped countries. At this very moment tens of thousands of children are dying an agonising death, and hundreds of thousands more are being born into a world which will give them pain and misery, hunger, starvation, sickness, despair. Do you realise that? Or are you another of these weak-bellied lunatics like Palfrey who fight all the time to preserve the *status quo,* because *they* do all right?"

Banister said slowly: "Palfrey is—"

"Oh, I know what Palfrey is," said Anak, waving his hand to stifle the interruption. "He's a humanist up to a point. He means well, but can't see beyond his nose. Banister, this world is millions of years old; this planet has known human life of one kind or another for hundreds of thousands of years. Our present civilisation goes back how long? Let's be generous and say five thousand years. It's a snap of the fingers compared with time. Human life doesn't count – but the purpose of human life does. The purpose, that's the crux of the whole matter, that's the thing which you people down there don't seem to understand."

Anak talked as if he were inspired – or as if he believed that he was inspired. There was a burning glow in his eyes, a kind of light that radiated; and there was exaltation on his face. He raised both hands a little above his head, with the fingers curled but not clenched.

"Man, you *must* learn to understand the simple truth. Evolution in man is for the purpose of perfection. The ultimate end of progress is the perfect man. What this world needs is not a crawling, squalling, spawning mass of parasites subject to all the ills and ailments of the world, to all the diseases, curses, superstitions and false gods. What this world needs is a race of perfect human beings – people like *me*."

Banister heard the last words, but hardly noticed them. Everything he heard convinced him that this man wasn't sane by standards "down below"; but that he had intelligence great enough to challenge any in the world.

Then, as a kind of boomerang, the last sentence struck into Banister's mind.

"What this world needs is a race of perfect human beings – people like *me*."

Nothing else could have conveyed the same message, the same blind faith in his own destiny.

"We're creating a perfect world, that is what Palfrey has to understand. It will take some time. We are getting nearer, but don't wish to act until we're quite ready. Do you understand?"

He was talking to Banister now, rather than to an audience; his voice was pitched lower, and he looked at Banister most of the time. Occasionally he glanced at Morris-Jones, and Banister saw what the others had probably seen for some time; the scientist was awake.

"That is why I want Palfrey to stop what he is doing," Anak went on. "We are wasting precious supplies of *fatalis*, although it is true that we are

producing much more, and more easily, than we were. But we are dispersing effort when we should be concentrating it. We are not *ready* for the decimation of the masses yet. They are still needed, down below."

Banister said huskily: "I don't quite understand you."

"I'm talking plainly enough," said Anak irritably. "Decimation of the masses hardly needs explaining. We had to find a killer agency which would not affect anyone we wanted to protect – which was contagious but not infectious, but which could be contagious only for a limited period. That is *fatalis* – we adopted Palfrey's name for it. It is now perfected – we can make carriers immune, can control its effect. When we are ready, we can kill off the majority of the people in India, China, the Near and Far East – all the really backward, semi-primitive and wholly illiterate peoples. It will be no one's loss. But until we can make sure that we can operate the world without them as a labour force, we have to be careful. What we need for the time being, of course, is a graded scale of world citizenship – First grade, Second and Third. Or if you like, ruling, executive and labouring classes or castes. It will take a few years to get everything sorted out, and that is hardly surprising – remember how short a span this civilisation has had. But it is the last stage in the development of man, of course – or the penultimate stage. Under my leadership man will reach perfection. But men like Palfrey, aiding the Governments of peoples who are satisfied to lead their silly, wasted lives, get in the way."

He paused, as if to gather his vigour and say softly, menacingly: "Palfrey does more harm than anyone, because he has his men in so many places, and because he has learned one lesson – he sees the problems as world problems, not as national. He wants to preserve the world and make slow evolutionary progress towards bettering it. I must convince him that it will be possible to bring perfection in our life-time. If he were to come here, I think he would agree. Don't you?"

Then Morris-Jones sprang at the Leader.

None of those present was prepared, not even the guards by the door. One moment the old man had been slumped back in his chair, his eyes open but glazed, looking as if this were bewildering and confusing him, and he could not comprehend. The next moment, he leapt.

He brushed Banister aside and reached Anak before the Leader could protect himself. His hands clutched at and fastened themselves round Anak's throat. His own throat was a mass of veins which stood out like whipcords. His teeth were bared and his lips drawn tightly back, his eyes seemed to pop out of his head.

He was a big man; and still powerful.

Banister saw that he was trying to twist, to break Anak's neck. It would need only seconds, if he could maintain the grip. The guards were already on the move, but hadn't time to save Anak. Klim uttered a cry, jumped forward – and kicked against a chair and went sprawling.

The Professor's fingers were buried in the Leader's throat. He was writhing, gasping with the effort, seemed to be drawing in the air and

praying for strength to do this thing.

Here was a chance that would never come again, to put Anak in his debt.

Banister moved swiftly, struck the Professor savagely on the side of the jaw, struck him again until he released his hold.

He fell; and Anak fell, also.

The guards reached Anak, but they might well have been too late. Klim got unsteadily to his feet. Rita ran to Anak, dropped on to her knees and raised his head. He was breathing as heavily, almost as laboriously as the Professor.

One guard stood over the old man.

Klim said to Banister: “Anak will never forget his debt,” in a quivering voice.

Banister thought: “And nor shall I. Nor shall I. I ought to have helped to kill him.”

He could have screamed.

The door opened and several other people hurried in, looking alarmed; frightened. The television screen flickered; of course, all this had been watched. Among the newcomers was Sophie, who looked so much like Marion.

“I shall get up,” Anak said, deliberately.

He stood up with Rita’s help, and while the others stood in a ring round him. Within the ring were Banister, Klim, Rita, the two guards – and the Professor who had nearly succeeded in breaking the Leader’s neck.

“How shall we kill him?” Sophie asked.

Chapter 17

The effort had drawn all the strength out of Morris-Jones. He was shaking as he rose to his feet. He looked at the girl who had spoken so casually, then at Anak, as if he knew what to expect – and was ready to die.

The guards held him.

"Release him," Anak said.

He was massaging his neck gingerly.

The guards obeyed.

"Anak—" began Sophie.

Anak waved her to silence, and she dropped back into the circle.

Banister thought: "He's going to kill himself, he's going to show what a perfect human being he is – Lord, and Lord High Executioner too."

He felt his own hands clenched by his side; felt his fingers tense, as they would if they were encircling that red and puffy neck. He wished that Morris-Jones had succeeded, could curse himself for robbing the man of the chance of success.

Anak smiled.

There was nothing savage or gloating about it, it was just a smile – without real humour, perhaps with a tinge of admiration.

"At least when you believe you believe fiercely," he said to the scientist. "When you've had a few days' rest you may feel better. Sophie, have him taken away, and look after him. I'll tell you when he is to be questioned again."

If the fair-haired woman resented being chosen for that task, she said nothing. She and a man led Morris-Jones out. He didn't speak, didn't struggle or shout or show defiance.

The door swung after him.

"All right, I'm all right," said Anak, and waved his hand. Everyone else who had hurried in went out, and the guards took up their position by the door. "Rita, send for a masseuse, or I shall get a stiff neck." He looked at Banister with a kind of heavy humour. "It wouldn't do for perfect men to get a stiff neck, would it?"

Banister said: "I'm beginning—to see."

"I felt that you would," said Anak quickly, as if pleased. "I have the same feeling about Palfrey, too. That's why I've always been lenient with Palfrey – although to give him his due, he's often managed to outwit me." He gave a laugh that was really a rattle of incredulity. "It's one reason, anyhow. Palfrey has the ear of governments. He has a lot of influence. He might make some of the people down below *listen*, I think. Do you?"

"If he thought it justifiable," Banister agreed.

"That is what I mean," said Anak. "If he thought it was worthwhile, he could probably arrange for some of the Governments to work *with* us. He could fool them – because they trust him. Supposing, for instance, he was to

suggest to Washington and London that I'm only waiting until the time is ripe to pounce on Russia, they wouldn't exactly be averse, would they? And if he whispered to Moscow that I am just as much a Communist as anyone there, and am only waiting for the right moment to pounce on the Western powers – what do you think would happen, Banister?"

Banister thought: "You crafty devil." He said aloud: "They'd wait."

"Now that is why I want Palfrey on my side, and why it is a nuisance that we've been skirmishing as we have," declared Anak. "It's a waste of time, energy, everything. It isn't as if Palfrey can *do* anything to stop me. He simply has a nuisance value. But I think he'll come to heel if you'll convince him that I'm quite prepared to spread *fatalis* among the people of a big city – London, say, or New York. Don't you think he will, Banister?"

Banister had to answer, had to make the answer sound reasonable.

"He might."

"I think perhaps you will have a slightly more optimistic outlook a little later," Anak said. "I shall almost certainly want you to go down and convert Palfrey. But we'll talk about that later. I want you to catch the spirit of the place first, I want you to *feel* the magnificence of it. Move about freely, go where you like."

A picture flashed into Banister's mind: of a door opening, and old men and old women, naked to the waist; toiling, with a slave-driver standing over them, and the whips cracking. He could have said: "To the slave camps, too?"

He said: "Thank you," stiffly.

Now, all he wanted to do was to get away; to be free from the very stench of horror which seemed to come from Anak's lips.

"Anak," Rita said quietly, "there is the Council meeting, soon."

"Oh, yes, I'd better tell them what's been happening. They'll want to see the pictures, too. Very impressive, weren't they, Banister?"

Anak stalked out.

Klim and Rita followed him.

Banister watched the door swinging, gritted his teeth, then turned slowly towards the other doors and, eventually, reached his own room. He dropped into the easy-chair. This was a moment of solitude, giving a kind of peace, but it wouldn't be enough. He could not lock the door. He could not prevent the television screen from lighting up. He could only sit back and long for this silent solitude to go on and on, so that he could be free from the need for acting, free from the dread of making a single slip.

A door opened.

Banister had been alone for a little while, but not for long enough. The same thoughts, the same images, had been passing through his mind, and they were starting again. Now, he made himself look up.

"Tired, Neil?" asked Rita.

"Yes."

"It's not surprising. You've had a great deal to absorb in a little while. It takes some men a year to get used to it."

"Rita," he said, chokily, "it's absolutely crazy!"

"Is it?"

"He *believes* all that."

"So do I," she said. "So does Klim. So do all—" She stopped, and smiled faintly. "So do most of us." She lay on the bed, facing him, her knees drawn up, her body twisted at the waist, so that she was thrusting towards him provocatively; and he knew that she was doing what woman had done from the beginning of time. "Neil, it's true, you know. Have you seen anything but perfect human beings here? Even mentally perfect – like Anak. We haven't all reached that stage yet, but think of the magnificence of his gesture. The compassion and tolerance he felt for Morris-Jones – when a lesser man would have demanded some kind of punishment."

Banister made no comment.

"Anyone else would have," she insisted. "He didn't. After this, I think Morris-Jones will help in every way he can."

"And what if he doesn't?"

She said flatly: "He'll be put to work. Practically all those people you saw were men who refused to co-operate. They can't be sent home. They must perform some useful task. So . . ."

And she lay there, talking like that yet expecting to move him, to draw him to her. That was the first time he had felt that he could hate her. The softness of her voice and the beauty of her body and her face made it so much worse; she could lie there and talk about men being flogged into working, men who were almost dropping, whose bodies were sheathed with sweat wrung out by agony.

"But remember, you've never seen them," Rita said. "Klim and Anak simply mustn't know. They're very pleased with you. You've been frank with us. We believe all you've said. They'd hoped to learn a lot, but as you're not a scientist – I was able to tell them that! – and your immunity is natural, there's only one real purpose you can serve, now – to convert Palfrey. Keep Anak and Klim pleased, Neil. Soon, they'll want you to take a message back to Palfrey."

"Is that all?" asked Banister, heavily.

She stretched her arms above her head, and his gaze fell upon her, but in that slow, seductive movement she reminded him of a cat – a cat which arched its back.

"Pretty puss."

"Hi, puss!"

"Puthy, puthy."

He was stony-faced.

"Come and rest," she whispered.

Each day, Banister was allowed to go out to the ski-run. Each day for four days, the clouds kept away and the weather was perfect.

The invigoration of the run, five or six times each day, was still the same. Banister found the other way up to the chalet and the top of the run, and so

the guides were never sent after him again.

He had all his thoughts to brood over.

He had one new fear, too.

Mick didn't turn up. The man who had dared to confide in him, the man who had told him of the resistance movement within High Peak, didn't appear. His wife – or the woman who had been with him – and the two children were usually at or near the chalet, and the boy was beginning to ski very well. But apart from that, Banister saw no one in whom he could confide.

Was the resistance movement still in existence?

On the fourth day he walked out into the snow, and as he neared the chalet, saw a man coming towards him. It was the lank-haired, thin-cheeked man who was always so vicious about the "fools down below", and wanted to exterminate them. Banister now knew that his name was Doggett; and Banister disliked him probably more than he disliked any other individual he knew. Dogget always had a chip on his shoulder.

He hoped the man would pass.

Doggett drew level.

"Take the other run today," he whispered, and his dark eyes flashed at Banister.

Banister caught his breath.

"You mean—Mick—"

"Yes."

"Right."

Was it a trick?

He did not make up his mind until he was actually on the way down, sticks behind him, knees bent, chest and head thrust forward into the rushing wind. He saw most of the tracks leading to the right, only one or two to the left.

He swerved left.

Soon he was hidden from the chalet and everyone up there by the great overhanging outcrop of rock. He seemed to be alone. The only noise was of the air rushing past him. He slackened his speed, and came very near the spot which he had reached before.

A voice came out of the whiteness.

"Not that way."

He stopped.

"Go back the other way. Sit down on a rock and take off a ski – look as if you're having trouble with it."

"All—right."

Banister got up, and walked slowly towards several rocks, black on one side but covered with snow on the other, which were within sight of the people at the chalet. He began to take off one ski. He glanced about him, but was careful not to look in the same direction for too long at a time; glasses might be trained on him.

He saw a movement in the snow – as if something beneath it were stirring

gently. Then a man's hand appeared by the side of a rock; then a face and shoulders. Banister recognised him, but did not know his name.

"Hi, Banister," he said, with a pronounced American accent. He looked young, and in spite of the danger, seemed eager, confident. "How you doing up there with the great men?"

"I'm getting along," Banister said, with an effort. "I haven't broken anyone's neck yet."

"Keep on not breaking them," the American said. "I'm Ray Morgue. Isn't that a name to be proud of?" He grinned; but his smile quickly faded, an anxious look came in his eyes. "Banister, do you know where Mick is?"

"I—don't."

"He's disappeared."

"I've been here looking for him."

"They told his wife that he had been moved to one of the other cities for special work," the American said. "I don't believe it. But—maybe you could find out."

Banister told him what he thought."I guess it could be," Morgue said heavily. "Try to find out, Banister, it could be important. If Mick is coming back, we'll wait for him. If he's not coming back, we'll have to make fresh plans. Can you tell us anything else?"

"No," Banister said.

He could have told him about Anak's hopes for a deal through Palfrey; but if this were a form of treachery it would be better if he kept that to himself.

Morgue said: "Okay. It's been nice knowing you! If you can find out what's happened to Mick, let Doggett know."

"How?"

"He'll find a way to talk to you."

"All right," Banister said.

The young American ducked beneath the snow. There would be air-holes nearby, for him to breathe in as he made his way back to the chalet or to inside the mountain. One moment his eager, smiling face was there, the next there was just the silence and the snow and distant peaks with their awful grandeur.

Banister stood up.

Then he became aware of the drone of an aeroplane. As he made for the top of the run, he looked into the sky, and soon he saw the silver grey speck. It was coming nearer, but was very high; surely higher than it should have been if it were going to land.

Then he saw something dark fall from its belly.

Chapter 18

Banister stood quite still.

He was halfway between the outcrop and the chalet. A dozen or more people were near him. All turned and looked towards the aircraft. One man was within two yards, and Banister heard him muttering to himself, almost in supplication, as if frightened.

Everyone had stopped moving.

The aircraft sped on between the mountain peaks, a silver fish which appeared to go steadily and smoothly, not swaying from side to side. The black "thing" which had come from its belly was still a falling dark shape, but above it a parachute had mushroomed out, and the great silk envelope swayed gently in the wind, checking the fall of the man who came down.

Was it a man?

Banister's jaws hurt because he was clenching his teeth so tightly; the palms of his hands were sore because of the same kind of pressure. He began to move forward. It was a man, there was no doubt about that; and soon he would be on the ground, buried in the snow that would break his fall. His chief danger was that he might strike a rock, but he seemed to be falling on to the ski-run.

The silence and the tension in everyone around him troubled Banister most.

Then someone screamed.

The aircraft burst into flames.

One moment it was flying straight ahead, with the sun glistening on its silvered wings and fuselage and showing the windows like tiny little black dots; the next, it was just a great ball of flame which seemed to hang in the air for a few awful seconds – and then fell, with a cloud of smoke ballooning upwards.

It disappeared behind a ridge, and smaller balls of flame flew in all directions, the smoke became a huge black ball, which gradually began to settle and disperse.

Now the people who were near Banister, and Banister himself, looked at the falling man. He was close to the ground. Some people started to move towards him, and that was a signal for everyone to start going forward. Banister went with them.

The parachutist hit the ground and fell flat; he was dragged through the snow for a few yards, and then lay still. He was not still for long. Banister was some distance away, but others reached the man, and helped him up. These were quickly shouldered aside by the guards who had come from High Peak.

Then Banister drew near enough to see the parachutist, who now stood between two guards.

It was Palfrey.

The sky was a bright blue and the snow virgin-white and sparkling; yet to Banister, everything was dark. Until this moment, he had not realised how much Palfrey meant; how powerfully the man's image had been built up in his mind. Palfrey had become a legendary figure: Palfrey was the man who at once troubled, harassed and impressed Anak. With Palfrey "down below" there had been reason to hope. Now he was here, and the aircraft which had brought him had turned into a ball of fire; everyone else in it must have perished.

Banister pushed past the others, shouldering some aside. Most of them were recovering from the shock of surprise, although it still lay upon them. The most natural man among them seemed to be Palfrey, who was smiling faintly as he looked at him.

He saw Banister.

"Hallo, Neil," he said.

"Sap, you fool!"

"Oh, I don't know," said Palfrey. "After the last spot of bother, I thought I'd better come and see whether we could agree terms of some kind. How are you?"

"I'm—all right."

"Good."

Palfrey and the others began to walk towards the main gates of the city. Banister took off his skis and caught up with them. Palfrey looked about him with lively interest. A crowd followed. The guards kept on either side of Palfrey, but did not object to Banister walking with them.

"Have you heard about Morris-Jones?" Palfrey asked.

"Yes. He's here."

"I know," Palfrey said. His smile grew broader. "We followed him!"

That was the second time that Banister began to hope; the first time had been when it had seemed possible to him that he would be able to fool Anak.

In a different way, Palfrey seemed to be as confident as the Leader.

Banister found himself aching for the moment when these two men would meet. Everything else faded into insignificance; even the destruction of the aircraft, and all it meant.

He wondered if he would be allowed to be present; he kept close to the guards as they went through the gates, and then stopped to take off their thick, outer clothes. One helped Palfrey off with his.

Klim and Rita appeared.

"How did you get here?" Klim demanded harshly.

Palfrey looked at him.

"Why, hallo! Rotorua last time, wasn't it?"

"I asked—"

A television screen nearby began to flicker. Palfrey glanced at it, in surprise; it was the first one he had seen here. The shadowy figure of a man appeared, just head and shoulders; then Anak's face.

Banister saw Palfrey's smile fade, saw his jaw set, guessed that he sensed

the truth about Anak.

"Bring Palfrey here at once, Klim."

"Yes—yes, of course. Come along," Klim said to Palfrey.

He had been rebuked, and showed that he felt it. He did not take Palfrey's arm, but walked beside him, with guards on either side; Rita and Banister were just behind.

Rita was staring at Palfrey's back, with the same look of disbelief as Klim had shown; a kind of awed wonderment.

They went into the house where Rita lived, and up a flight of stairs into a room where Banister had not been before. It was large and very plainly furnished; a big table, chairs round it, and maps, not pictures, on the walls. It wasn't until afterwards that Banister studied the maps, but he saw Palfrey's gaze flickering over them.

Anak sat at the head of the table.

He pointed towards a chair at the far end, and Palfrey was led to it. Palfrey seemed to fall into the flow of events easily. He sat down, and smiled at Anak across twenty feet of polished table. Rita, Klim and Banister sat down about halfway along the table. There was a small machine in front of Anak, another in front of Palfrey; they reminded Banister of microphones.

Anak said abruptly: "How did you get here?"

"I flew," murmured Palfrey.

"I know you flew," said Anak roughly. "You know what happened to the pilot and crew of the aircraft. We brought them down with a light ray, our Project Twenty-one – an unfailing means of destroying *all* aircraft which come into forbidden territory."

Anak seemed to be fighting for his self-control; to find it difficult to speak calmly. Palfrey's arrival had shaken them down to the very foundations of their belief in themselves. Nothing was the same as it had been – and belatedly Banister began to realise why.

Palfrey had known where to come; and if Palfrey knew, so did others.

"How did you find out how to get here?" Anak went on brusquely.

"We followed Morris-Jones," Palfrey said. "You ought to know—"

"That was impossible."

"Oh, no," Palfrey protested. "Nothing is impossible, you ought to know that. You also ought to know—"

"Palfrey," Anak said harshly, "we have perfected practically every form of human behaviour, the good and the bad. You once thought that you would be able to persuade Rita to speak, by torture or torment. You know *nothing* about the methods we can use, if necessary. We don't like using them, but —"

Palfrey said gently: "So you don't like using them."

That was all. He didn't even sneer – and yet the words were one great sneer, might almost have been a whip slashing across Anak's face.

Banister found himself thinking, praying: "Don't upset him for the sake of it, Sap, don't anger him."

"But we shall use them," Anak repeated.

"Oh, I'm sure," said Palfrey. He took a cigarette-case out of his pocket, a swift movement which brought the two guards forward, as if they were touched with fear because this was something which they could not understand. He lit a cigarette. "All the same, I followed Morris-Jones, by instruments. We took bearings, and discovered precisely where he landed. So I came to see what was going on." He drew lightly on the cigarette, then glanced at the glowing tip. "The 'plane I came in was guided by remote control. I didn't fly it, there were no other passengers and no other crew. You didn't really do much damage. Now that we have bearings and are quite sure where you are, we could blast this place to smithereens." He smiled. "Remote control war-heads and rockets, all that kind of thing. Even an atom bomb." He kept smiling, but there was no humour in his eyes, they were as cool and calm and deadly as Anak's. "You might stand up to ordinary bombardment, but you couldn't withstand the atom bomb, could you?"

Anak was very pale, his teeth clamped together; Banister was alarmed by the expression in his eyes.

Palfrey did not appear to be frightened.

"But we're all civilised people, aren't we?" he went on. "We don't want to talk about blasting each other to pieces. We'll have to talk terms. We—"

Anak raised his hands, and even Palfrey stopped, as if instinctively obeying a command. Anak stood up, slowly. In Rita's eyes there sprang an expression almost of pleading, but in Klim's it was nearer exultation.

"I shall not come to terms with you or with anyone down below, Palfrey. Before doing that I would wipe out your silly civilisation. It would be quite easy. *Quite* easy. You and your threats of atom bombs and hydrogen bombs which cost a fortune in money and in men's time – what do they mean? We could destroy New York overnight without affecting anywhere outside – we could destroy Manhattan and leave Brooklyn intact; or destroy Westminster and leave the City of London unscathed. You don't know what destructive weapons are down there, you've only just begun to use them."

Palfrey didn't speak.

Banister felt himself losing that glow of hope, giving up all thought that he might be able to fool, to defeat Anak.

"That is the big trouble down below," Anak went on impatiently. He didn't move away from the end of the table, looked as if he were addressing a multitude again; and the glow of exultation was in his eyes for Palfrey as well as for Banister to see. "You can't control your weapons. We can. We shall want to clear away some cities and towns, as I've told Banister, but we don't want destruction to be haphazard. This shall go, and that shall stand – *look*!"

He strode towards the long wall, and pressed a bell-push. The map hanging there, of the southern hemisphere, rolled itself up. Behind it was a screen. Anak pressed another button; lights glowed in the screen, and then a picture gradually appeared – a picture of London.

Banister held his breath.

He saw Palfrey gripping the arms of his chair.

There was the heart of London, on relief-map scale; St. Paul's stood out, with the Houses of Parliament, Westminster Abbey, Buckingham Palace – all the famous landmarks showed, and the streets were there, the spacious stateliness of Whitehall and the Mall. There were people, too, and cars – it was a perfect scale model, and appeared to be bathed in sunlight.

Anak pressed a third button.

Banister found himself rising from his chair.

Parts of London began to crumble. There was no noise, no sign of bursting bombs, nothing to suggest an explosion; but buildings just crumpled up. Some were in the middle of the city, others were on the outskirts. After a few seconds, a kind of dust or smoke rose above the ruins; gradually this spread, and the whole of the city was blacked out.

They waited, in tense silence; but the end of Palfrey's cigarette glowed bright as he drew at it.

The smoke cleared.

The greater buildings, nearly all the landmarks, remained.

The Thames wound its way slowly and gracefully among other buildings, which had never been there before; a new concept of London. There were many open spaces; all the parks and many others, where there had been houses or factories or shops. Great areas near the stations, crowded if not overcrowded with factories standing cheek-by-jowl with homes, had vanished; and parks were there instead, or tall modern blocks of flats.

The last of the smoke seemed to drift away.

"That is what we can do," Anak said. "Destroy the worthless and preserve the beautiful. Is there a weapon in the whole world below that can do anything like that?"

The picture on the screen faded, and the light came on. Palfrey was stubbing out his cigarette and lighting another. He must have felt much as Banister had – touched with the horror of the realisation of what Anak could do. If he were, he didn't show it.

"Not yet," he said. "Not quite."

"If it were necessary," Anak said, "I could begin that destruction, the tearing down of your cities, tomorrow. Don't talk to *me* about terms."

Chapter 19

Banister dropped back into his chair and watched the protagonists; and wondered why, if Anak were so sure of himself, he had been shaken out of his usual almost contemptuous calm.

It was a fleeting thought.

At the back of Banister's mind was the question – why had Palfrey come? He could see little chance that Palfrey would ever be able to escape. He had deliberately sacrificed himself – but why? What point or purpose could there be in it?

Anak said abruptly: "Why did you come, Palfrey?"

Palfrey answered promptly, and convincingly; at least, the others seemed convinced.

"After the death of the village in England, I had to try to make terms. It wasn't a job I could let anyone else handle."

After a pause, Anak said raspingly: "I will see you later. Take him away."

He waved his hands, and two guards came forward. Palfrey stood up. Neither man laid a hand upon him. They went out, and the door swung behind them, soundlessly, until it came to a standstill. That was no signal for anyone else in the room to move or to talk. Rita looked at Anak as if everything depended on his next words; as if the fate of the world were in the balance.

He said: "How *did* he get here?"

No one spoke.

He banged the table.

"I say it is impossible, he could not have followed Morris-Jones!"

Still no one spoke.

Anak swung round on Banister, passed the table, gripped the lapels of Banister's coat. The physical strength of the man was enough to put fear into Banister. The aggressive face with the magnificent features was thrust forward, and Banister could almost feel the burning power of those dark eyes.

"*You* are a friend of his. *You* will find out. *You* will persuade him that you are still with him and tell us how he got here. Do you understand?"

"I—yes," Banister said, and could not find words to refuse. "Yes, I—"

"And if you fail," Anak growled, "you will know what pain can be. You will suffer more pain than anyone in the world has ever known."

He pushed Banister away from him.

This was another room which Banister hadn't seen before. There was the usual television screen – one on each side, in fact – a small table and several chairs. There were a number of instruments which he couldn't identify on either wall, and one or two fixtures in the floor. The only thing which really meant anything was the ring fastened to the floor; it was obvious that men could be tied to that.

Was this a torture chamber?

It was warm and well lit like the rest of the mountain city; and there was no stir of wind.

The door opened.

A man came in; it was Doggett. He went across to the television screen on the right, pressed a button, and made it glow. He was testing it; and it worked both ways. He tried the other. He hardly looked at Banister, hardly seemed to know that he was in the room. His lank hair needed cutting, and he looked sour and surly.

He switched off the second screen, then dropped a small screw.

He bent down to pick it up.

"Both screens will be off for ten minutes starting at four o'clock," he whispered. *"No tricks, quite safe, say what you like*."

He went out.

Palfrey came in.

Palfrey moved very slowly. His eyes were different from what they had been in the other room; dazed, shadowed. He walked more slowly. At first, Banister thought that they had been torturing him already, but there was no outward sign of injury, and his clothes were quite unruffled; so was his hair. It was so silky and curly and fair, like the golden hair of a child.

He looked at Banister, nodded but didn't speak, dropped into a chair, and sat back.

The door closed.

The two television screens were beginning to glow, but no shapes appeared on them, it simply meant that they were being watched.

"Sap," Banister began, awkwardly.

Palfrey didn't speak.

"Palfrey—"

"I know," Palfrey said, very quietly. "Just keep quiet a minute, will you? I've seen—some horrors. Have you heard about this Age of Destruction?"

"Only today."

"Odd thing," Palfrey said, and his lips twisted as if he were in pain. "I hadn't heard of it before, either. A nice thought on the part of Great God Anak. We've had the Stone Age, the Iron Age, the Water Age, the Bronze Age, the Ages of Steam, Electricity and Atomic Energy. Anak has a pretty notion – that all these are steps in the evolution of the perfect human species, but before perfection becomes universal, there must be an Age of Destruction. You saw—London?"

"Yes," said Banister; the word seemed to stick in his throat.

"He can do it. No reasonable doubt. He's much more powerful than I thought—than you thought. Thing is, I don't see how to stop him."

That explained the dark horrors in Palfrey's eyes.

Banister said: "I don't think you can. What brought you here, Sap? Why did you have to sacrifice yourself?"

Palfrey looked up sharply.

"I told Anak."

"Yes, I know, to fool him."

"Oh, no," Palfrey said softly. "I told him the truth. I thought the time had come to force terms. I thought he would be ready when he knew that we could find him. I hoped I'd find a way to fool him, but he's too strong. And you think so, too – you don't see how to stop him, either."

This was the kind of talk Anak would want to hear, surely; it was safe to keep it up.

"No," Banister said gustily. "He's too strong. He's everywhere. Look at the way he blew up your aircraft! There wasn't a shot, not even a guided missile, just a ray which disintegrated it. I suppose it's the same thing as he plans to use for the Age of Destruction."

Palfrey said slowly: "Yes. Probably."

"Come to terms," Banister urged, fiercely. "At least we'll get part of what we want that way. I'm not sure what he's really after, but I think you'll find that he wants to select the best humans, physically and mentally, and build them up into—perfection. Has he told you about his three grades?"

"He's shown me them," Palfrey said. "He's Grade One, with Rita and Klim and others, just a ruling class. Scientists and what they call Project Leaders are Grade Two. Below that, there are the ordinary work-people, Grade Three. Then – the slaves."

So he had seen those old men and old women.

"Listen," Palfrey burst out, "I *can't* compromise with a man who's capable of doing this."

"If you don't, what will happen?" Banister tried to sound rational. He kept glancing at his watch, and was conscious of the unseen eyes watching him through the television screen; if he looked at it too often, he might be suspected. "Universal destruction, no one will have any chance. Sap, you *must* work with him."

Palfrey didn't answer.

It was two minutes to four.

"How *did* you get here?" Banister asked, as if it were a casual question, just an odd item of incidental information that hardly mattered.

Palfrey's lips twisted.

"I followed Morris-Jones."

"Oh, that—" Banister shrugged. "It doesn't matter, if you don't want to tell me—"

"But I did follow Morris-Jones. I had him followed from the Cotswolds to the field where the helicopter he was taking off in was waiting. I had the helicopter trailed, by a form of radar, to the valley in the Pyrenees, where the other craft was waiting. I didn't know about the other craft until the helicopter landed. I knew from what had happened before that at some stage there would be faster-than-sound aircraft, and so one was hovering round above the helicopter. In spite of what Anak thinks, we have made some progress down below. We traced you a long way, too."

Banister looked at his watch; it was half a minute to four. He would have at most ten minutes to use; how could he use them best?

"So a faster-than-sound machine was waiting, equipped with cameras in the nose, everywhere, and it flew at a greater height than the 'plane they took Morris-Jones off in," Palfrey said. "We had plenty of pictures, and could pin-point the spot. That's the simple truth, and—"

The light at the screens flickered; and died.

As the glow faded on the screens, Banister moved forward, gripped Palfrey's arms and said in a voice so low pitched that for a moment he was afraid that Palfrey would not understand: "We're alone for ten minutes. They can't see or hear. Did you really follow Morris-Jones?"

A glint of understanding sparkled in Palfrey's eyes.

"Yes," he said, and went on very quickly, urgently: "Things are bad at home. You saw that London picture. Several small towns have collapsed like that. India, South America and Europe. Anak just said: 'If you don't do it my way, I'll do this to big cities.' We don't know exactly what he wants, yet, but —" Palfrey paused, gripped Banister's arm, and went on tensely: "Can we break him? Is there a chance? I came to find out, to see you."

"There's a group planning escape."

"Escape?" Palfrey echoed. "Oh, no. We've got to stay here, smash Anak, smash—"

"This is one of a dozen cities," Banister said. "It isn't the only one."

Palfrey didn't speak, but new horror crept into his eyes. That was the last thing he had expected; seemed to kill his fleeting hope.

Banister stirred himself to speak.

"We can try to organise, but need time. Take my advice, tell Anak that you'll go back and intercede with the Governments. His one big weakness is vanity. He's convinced that he can convert you and me and everyone, can't believe that anyone could possibly withstand his vile Perfection."

Palfrey watched, as if trying to see beyond the actual words.

The screen was still dull. The door was still closed.

"I'll try," Palfrey said. "Listen, Neil. Your job now – to find out what he uses, try to destroy it before it can be used—anywhere else."

"Right, yes."

"Try to destroy his supplies of *fatalis*."

"Right."

"I'll stall," Palfrey said. "I—"

"Not for too long. He won't be patient – no megalomaniac ever is. Do what he asks."

"All right – I'll try to stall until you can act on the destructive agent and the *fatalis.* Also, find out how many spies he has down below."

"I will."

"Locations of the other cities, too," Palfrey said. "Vital."

"I know."

"I think that's all." Palfrey's voice was pitched as low as Banister's. He had the same kind of desperate eagerness. Hope had come back to each of them – born out of faith, out of a conviction that the destruction which Anak planned could never really take place. "Wonderful. Neil. Marion sends her

love."

Banister didn't speak.

There was a flicker on the screen.

Banister said gruffly: "Well, all right, if you really followed Morris-Jones, I suppose he'll believe you. You *can't* hide anything from him, it's—uncanny. The only word." He passed a hand in front of his eyes. The screens were bright again now; Banister didn't think they had been off for ten minutes, but that didn't matter. "If you followed Morris-Jones that way—"

"I did," Palfrey said.

Images appeared on the screen; Klim's first, and then Anak's.

"We shall find out," Anak said.

Banister was alone in a room; he didn't know where the room was. He did not know how long he had been here. He could not think – not really think. He was a creature of emotions and sensations, he could feel, he could experience pain and fear, horror and dread, but could not really think – although somewhere, deep in his mind, there was the capacity to reason – there was the realisation that he would never have withstood the onslaught had he not believed that Palfrey had followed Morris-Jones.

He was stark naked.

He stood upright, without any wall to lean on, without any support, except a cord tied to his wrists above his head, and fastened to the ceiling. He was secured to the floor by a ring tied to his ankles.

He croaked words: "Stop—it—now—stop—it—"

A voice came: *"How did Palfrey find us, Banister?"*

Banister's voice was just a voice, drained of everything but empty sound.

"He trailed Morris-Jones. He—"

"Don't lie. How did he find us, Banister?"

"He followed—"

Banister felt himself turning round; it had happened before. He wanted to scream, beg, pray for mercy. He was standing on a small turn-table, which would whirl him round faster and faster. He could not stop it. He felt the speed quickening.

He screamed: "Don't do it, don't do it!"

Faster, faster . . .

He felt himself falling; he never did fall, but he felt himself falling. Wind rushed past his body. He was held down by his feet, but the cord above was slack. He was going round and round as if he were caught up in a gigantic whirlpool. Round and round, his body falling lower and lower, round and round, lower and lower, faster and faster.

He screamed.

His body screamed through the air.

He felt sudden torment; as if a million red-hot needles were sticking into him; at his eyes, his nose, his mouth, his tongue, the roof of his mouth – pins and needles, pins and needles, red hot pins and needles, red hot needles, stabbing in and out, in and out, needles stabbing in and out, burning,

tearing him to pieces, blinding him, stabbing at the root of his tongue.

Round and round, faster and faster, stabbing, burning, tearing . . .

The motion began to slacken, although at first he was hardly aware of it. He felt pain, but had no conscious thought. The pain eased. At last he knew that he was moving much more slowly. He felt himself pulled upright. He found himself standing upright, with his wrists tied together above his head, and the cord which tied them fastened to the ceiling.

Sweat poured off his body.

"How did Palfrey find us, Banister?"

"He followed Morris-Jones. He—"

They thrashed him with the cat.

"How did Palfrey find us, Banister?"

"He followed Morris-Jones. He—"

They struck and kicked and twisted his arms and legs, and tortured him diabolically, yet did not drive him into unconsciousness, kept him so that he could always suffer more.

They flashed powerful, blinding, burning lights in front of his eyes, and slapped his face, right-left-left-left-right-left.

They stopped.

"*How did Palfrey find us, Banister?*"

"He followed Morris-Jones."

They bathed his lacerated back and face, on the first day; and massaged his limbs on the second day; and now, on the beginning of the third, he walked out of the room freely and easily, without any feeling of pain or soreness. But he remembered everything.

He walked slowly towards the main street, which he knew well. A few people recognised and smiled at him, he spoke to several of them. He saw the round-faced American youth hurrying into a shop; the American took no notice of him. It was a library; Banister knew that he would have no excuse to go in there, so he walked on.

He reached the entrance to the house where he knew he should find Rita, and perhaps Klim; possibly Anak.

He hesitated, then went in.

Palfrey was sitting back in an easy-chair, looking as much at home there as he might in his own home. He also looked rested, and free from strain and fear. That was a shock in itself.

Rita was at the desk, with the typewriter pushed to one side, studying some columns of figures. She looked up – she jumped up and came hurrying. Before Banister could move, she had put her arms round him; he felt the warm touch of her lips. He felt the magnetism of her beauty, too; he could not hate her as he knew that he should.

"It's so good to see you again!" she exclaimed, and stood back.

"Is it?" Banister said.

"Young love," Palfrey murmured, and took out cigarettes. "I can see what they mean by claiming that this place is perfection." There was a hint of

laughter in his voice; hadn't he suffered? How could he *act*; pretend? "You couldn't have a more perfect welcome than that!"

Banister said: "I suppose not." He could almost believe that Palfrey had been hypnotised into acceptance of Anak's mastery.

"You'll forget all that happened to you," Rita said, quite lightly. "It's all over. You won't have to go through that again. And you *must* admit that we can heal the body wonderfully."

"Wonderfully," Banister echoed, stiffly.

Palfrey said in a sharper voice: "Snap out of it, Neil. You ought to know by now that it's necessary to have complete obedience, of mind and heart. They had to know how I followed Morris-Jones, and daren't allow the possibility of any error. How can one blame them? With such a conception as this—"

He spread his hands. He looked dazed; perhaps dazzled was a better word, as if there were a light, a vision, of such power that he could not really see; yet he could comprehend the ineffable beauty which lay on it. Yet when Rita looked away from him his expression changed, as if he were trying to convey a secret, urgent, message.

"It would be crazy to fight against it any longer," he said. "Anak has all the qualities to make a world leader, all the scientific know-how; everything. Even if we could fight it, we shouldn't. I'm going down below to present his ultimatum to UNO – and all governments through UNO. Very simple – and of course he's right – he wants unconditional surrender."

Banister sat down, abruptly.

"You agree, of course," Palfrey said brusquely.

Was he serious? His eyes were blank, he seemed to be.

"If—if they hadn't tortured me," Banister muttered, "I'd feel happier."

Palfrey couldn't *believe* – could he? Remember Palfrey had seen those slaves; the slave-driver; everything.

"They did it to me," Palfrey said briskly. "It was just one of those things. Forget it. I'm going down below to try to make some of them see sense. Amazing how different things look from up here." He drew at the cigarette and gazed at the ceiling, as if the vision were still there.

Palfrey – looking, behaving, as if he had really been converted. *Was* it possible?

"One gets a better perspective, a truer balance," he said. "One can breathe. Picture the world we're going to make, Neil, just as soon as we're ready. Preserving all the best of the world below, in people and in buildings, and just wiping out the rest – painlessly."

He stood up.

His eyes glowed.

"That's the beauty of it," he said, in an exalted voice. "Painlessly. No one need suffer, there will be no pointless destruction, no vandalism. Those who can serve us, will survive, those whose lives are purposeless—" He shrugged.

"But I needn't tell you!" He laughed, unexpectedly, moved to Rita, hugged her with one arm and kissed her lightly. "You were one of the first

to see the truth. Look after Neil, while I'm gone."

"I'll do that." Her voice was gentle, there was a smile in her eyes. "Everything will be all right now."

The television screen, which had been glowing all the time, grew brighter; a man appeared on it.

"Will Dr. Palfrey report to the Council Chamber, please."

"This is it," said Palfrey. He turned towards the screen and pressed a switch. "Coming." He behaved as if he were part and parcel of High Peak; he took everything for granted, nothing appeared to surprise him. He put his hands on Rita's shoulder, and kissed her again; less lightly. "I'll see you soon." He swung away from her, and put out a hand to Banister. "*Au revoir*, Neil."

"*Au revoir*," Banister said stiffly.

Palfrey nodded, and went towards the door, and Banister followed him. The figure faded from the screen. Palfrey mouthed words which had no sound, only a great significance.

"Up to you, understand?"

Banister gave an almost imperceptible nod, as Palfrey went out. He kept his expression blank but felt an inexpressible relief.

Palfrey was going below, to play for time, to give him a chance to organise up here. *Was* there the slightest hope?

Rita reached Banister's side.

"Let's go and see him off," she said.

She led the way to one of the platforms with the great window overlooking the snow-clad peaks and the snow-filled valleys. This one overlooked hangars and small aircraft and, in the distance, the wreckage of another. After a few minutes, Palfrey appeared, walking on his snow-shoes. Two men were with him.

A small aircraft stood outside a hangar. It seemed no time before Palfrey and the other men climbed in.

It was the more eerie because the thick glass of the window muffled all sound; all Banister could hear was the breathing of the girl who stood by his side, touching his hand.

Smoke shot out of the rear of the aircraft; it stood there for a moment, and then the smoke grew blacker; there was movement, as of a great gust of wind – and then, a long way off, a silver streak showed in the sky.

It vanished.

"He's gone," Rita said. "If he can persuade the governments below to do nothing for a few months—"

"Wrong way of dealing with the situation," a man growled from Banister's side. Banister hadn't heard him come, but his voice and the way he spoke told him that it was Doggett. "We shouldn't bargain with the fools down below, we should just present an ultimatum. They'd accept it." He turned round.

His hand touched Banister's, and there was a slip of paper in it. Banister clutched it. "You mark my words," Doggett went on, "we use the velvet

glove too much."

He stalked off.

Banister slipped the paper into his pocket, then left the viewpoint with Rita. The paper seemed to burn through the cloth to the flesh.

Chapter 20

Banister was never alone.

If people in the street, in the dining-hall, in the shops were not looking at him; if he were not in the room with Rita; then the screen glowed and he knew that wherever he stood, he could be seen. The slip of paper seemed like burning ice in his pocket, but he dared not take it out.

Rita was sitting back in an easy-chair, with a drink by her side, listening to a Brahms *concerto* on a radiogram. With the note still burning in his pocket, Banister watched her. The calm beauty appalled him; she was so sure that she was right. It was a form of madness; how could it be anything else?

The screen was glowing because they were being watched; it seemed to Banister that the watching was more intense since Palfrey had left, although that might be because of his own tension, his fears and burning desire to read the note.

An image appeared on the screen; Klim's.

"Rita, come to the Council Chamber, will you?"

"Yes, Klim." She got up at once, as if with instinctive obedience. The image began to fade. "Shall I leave the radiogram on, Neil?"

"Er—yes. Thanks."

She approached him, and smoothed his hair lightly with her right hand, then went on. The door swung behind her. She behaved as if she knew the kind of mental torment he was suffering, but that she also knew that it would not last for long.

The door stopped swinging.

The light still glowed.

Banister put his hand into his pocket and felt the paper; which was folded two or three times. Gradually, he unfolded it, until it was as flat as he could get it inside his pocket. He closed his eyes, appeared to be listening to the *concerto.* That would soon be over.

The music faded.

Banister stood up and went towards the radiogram, to switch it off. Just beside it there was a patch of shadow. He took his hand out of his pocket and held the paper in the shadow.

He read: "Dining-hall, 7.30, tonight."

It was not yet five o'clock.

Doggett was in the dining-hall, after the evening meal, with seven or eight others, including the fair-haired Sophie, and Rita. There was one other woman – and Banister recognised her as Mick's wife. They were talking and arguing, Doggett was as disgruntled as ever, Rita seemed to be touched with unusual serenity. As usual, the television screens were glowing, there was no corner of the room that wasn't watched.

An image appeared – the Chinese announcer.

“Miss Rita, will you please go to the Council Chamber? Klim would like to see you again.”

“Yes, of course.”

Rita jumped up. She smiled at Neil, but didn’t speak. The door, those doors which always swung to and fro, to and fro, until they stopped, swung maddeningly behind her.

It was twenty-five minutes to eight.

Banister looked at Doggett’s long-jawed face, but saw nothing to encourage him. The others went on talking. If Doggett had his way, he would just smash the world below, and build up again – there was little worth preserving, it was an archaic form of life, anyhow. He got up when he had finished saying that, and went out. None of the others spoke of him, of Palfrey, or anything which seemed to do with the conspiracy.

Doggett came back.

There was a hush in the room, as all of them looked towards the lank-haired man. Sophie was as tense as any.

Banister became aware of an atmosphere which he had never sensed here before; it was utterly different. It showed especially in the expression of the two women.

Doggett said: “I should say we’ve got half an hour, with luck. Glyn is keeping watch, we’ll be warned if anyone comes. Banister, we’ve faked the video, all that the controllers can see is an empty room. We’ve only managed to do it once before.”

Banister said quickly: “Doggett, do you know—”

“Just a minute,” Doggett said. The surliness had gone out of his voice, compassion was in its place. He looked at Mick’s wife. “Mary,” he said gently, “I hate to tell you, but you have to know.”

He stopped.

Mick’s wife said very slowly, very painfully: “He’s— dead?”

“Yes.”

“Rita—” began Mick’s wife, and didn’t finish.

“Yes,” Doggett said. “Rita must have reported that he opened the wrong door and let Banister see what was happening in the new shafts. It’s getting worse, every day. Anak and Klim are completely power drunk. Even if they were going to get away with all this, they couldn’t afford to get rid of men like Mick. It’s—” He broke off, mute with anger.

Mick’s wife said in the same husky voice: “We can’t waste time, Jim. What—what’s the meeting about?” She looked as if she were trying to show a real interest, but could not. Her eyes were filled with the grief of parting; probably she could see nothing except the round face and the rounded blue eyes of her husband.

“All right,” Doggett said. “I think there’s a chance that we can get away within the next seven days.”

Banister realised then that the escape plan had been their dream – as desperate as any in the history of war and tyranny. He saw the light of hope and of the courage which despair created in the eyes of all the men who

watched Doggett.

"We have aircraft practically assembled," Doggett went on. "They normally carry three men apiece; according to Mick and others in Project Ninety-seven, they can carry six at a pinch. That means there's room for all of us in the plan. We can get to Australia or New Zealand."

There was a panting eagerness in his voice; and the others watched, open-mouthed now.

"Between us we can take samples of *fatalis* and *pulveris*, documents, plans and formulae. Once they have all of that down below, they ought to be able to do plenty about it."

Only Mick's wife seemed not to hear him. Banister was choked into silence by the desperate hope in Doggett and the others.

"The timing will be the difficult thing," Doggett went on. "We mustn't take anything away until we're ready to go, if anything were missed—" He shrugged. "You don't need telling what that would mean. I'm not sure whether we can meet again in a group. I'll keep in touch, one by one, and —"

"We can't escape," Banister made himself say.

The short, sharp statement cut across Doggett's voice, made the others turn their heads towards him, drove the dazed look out of Mick's wife's eyes. They looked at Banister as if he were mad.

"Don't be a fool," Doggett said sharply. "We've planned this down to the last detail. We can use our own shaft which no one knows about – I'll tell you more about it later. What we want to know from you is what will be most useful down below. How much do they know about—"

"We can't go," Banister said doggedly. "Palfrey's gone down to gain time. Anak's delivered your ultimatum at last."

There was silence; tension; a growing sense of dread.

"He's used *fatalis* on a much bigger scale than ever before, and he's also used the disintegrating agent—"

Doggett exclaimed: "No!"

"Project One hundred and nine," Sophie said hoarsely. "*Pulveris*."

"I don't know what it's called, but it simply disintegrates buildings," Banister said slowly, hurtfully. "Palfrey says that several smaller towns down below have been destroyed. Anak's demanded co-operation – collaboration – from governments below. If he doesn't get it, he's threatened to destroy big cities. He can do it, I gather."

There was a long pause.

"Yes, he can – and will unless he gets what he wants," said Doggett unexpectedly. "He wants absolute domination of the world. He's appointed himself the Supreme Being. He wants to create men and women in his own image and build a world fit for his perfect creatures to live in – and to do it, he'll destroy everything."

Into a tense silence, Sophie said: "It's hideous, a sacrilege that—"

"Listen to me," Banister broke in. "Palfrey's pretending to see it Anak's way. He's acting as a kind of envoy. That gives us a little time. We have to

get at the supplies of *fatalis* and of the disintegrating agent, and must make sure that they can't be used. We've to find out where they're stored. The best we can do is name three individuals who can fly off, taking the information Palfrey needs – the location of other cities and mountain strongholds. If we fail with the rest of our job, Palfrey and the others down there still have some kind of a chance. So, we've two angles. One, find and destroy the source of power here; two, get all formulas and information to Palfrey." He stopped.

Doggett said huskily: "Yes." He looked ill.

Sophie said: "For seven *years* I've been planning, working, praying, thinking, dreaming, of getting out of here alive. For seven *years*."

She seemed to wince.

Mick's wife said: "I've been here for five years, Mick was hoping that next year at the latest we'd get away. With the children. We—"

Banister said slowly, firmly: "I think I can guess what you feel like. I can't justify throwing my weight about like this, but—there *are* the two jobs. Destroy everything Anak can use, and take all possible information down below. Once we destroy the weapons . . ."

"We blow ourselves up," a man said, in a queer, small voice.

Banister understood them; could get into their minds and feel as they did; he could not speak again.

They had come here, believing; hoping. Gradually the years had sapped their faith; gradually they had realised the empty mockery of the Higher World. Their minds, their thoughts, their hearts, their hopes – everything they possessed had been thrown into the passionate desire to escape. For years they had schemed, planned, dared – and now they were within reach of the moment when they could take their final chance.

The world "below", for so long a dream, had become a practical possibility.

He, Banister, was taking it away from them; was crumbling up their vision and their hope as the walls of great buildings crumbled.

With the realisation there came fear and a question: *could* he trust them? Or would they put escape first?

The fear faded, when Doggett moved.

"That's right," Doggett said, "we blow ourselves up. At least, we take the risk of doing it. Does it matter all that much?" He gave a queer, twisted grin. "Does it really make any difference? If we got down there safely and Anak released *pulveris*, we'd be blown to dust with the rest. In fact, if there's a chance to stay alive, this is it."

A man said: "I suppose so," and Banister's fear came back.

He asked hoarsely: "Is there a hope of taking over the whole place?"

No one answered, until Doggett said: "Mutiny," in a flat voice.

"That's it."

"I shouldn't think so. There are too many like Klim and Rita – enslaved by Anak. And far too many who just tag along with the rest, who don't think. Anak's perfect people aren't so different from the people below. They're

smug and complacent, they drift along, they're happy enough if someone else does their thinking for them."

Banister said: "We can't have much more time – here, or with the bigger scheme. Where can we meet and plan, how can we send messages?"

He felt better than he had since he had come here; now there was the possibility of planning, of acting; so now there was a reason for existence, something to do other than feel frightened or to feel the death of hope. He felt a passionate desire to work, fight, to stir these men to action.

Doggett said: "I'm in charge of the television system, and can fault it without anyone knowing, for a short time. We'll draw up a schedule of times and places where we can meet. In emergency I'll put the television out of action. I think we can get at the *fatalis* and the *pulveris* supplies. They're well guarded, but we've Resistance men in the different project rooms. Finding the other strongholds might be more difficult. We can try. Anak and Klim have been pretty close about that. We know the others exist, we don't know where." He glanced at the television screen. "I think we ought to stop – it will come back into operation in a few minutes. I—"

He stopped speaking. Several of the men went out; so did the two women.

Doggett said to Banister: "Now don't take any chances. Fool Rita as long as—"

He was facing the door; and a completely new expression seemed to freeze his face.

The horror which touched him also touched two others who were still present. Banister felt as if his whole body had been forced into a straitjacket. He stood like a statue, head turned towards the door – breathing with hardly a sign of movement, like the others.

Sophie stood there.

Klim was just behind her.

Klim moved forward. He didn't smile. He looked from man to man, sneeringly, contemptuously. His gaze lingered on none of them, until it fell on Doggett.

"I have suspected you for a long time, Doggett," he said.

Doggett didn't speak.

A man said in a quivering voice: "Where's Glyn? Glyn was on guard, where's Glyn?"

"Glyn is on the way to the work shafts. He won't succeed in killing himself." There was no expression in Klim's voice, and only cold contempt showed in his face. "The rest of you will soon be there. And as for Banister —"

He turned towards Banister.

"I have learned whom to trust," he said. "And I have learned how to punish."

"But you made a mistake," Sophie said, "even your perfection has a blemish, Klim. Because you trusted me."

Banister caught his breath.

"No, don't move," the girl went on in the same quiet voice, and stretched

out her hand towards Klim. “I thought it safer to take a charge of *fatalis*. If I should touch you, there would be a most unfortunate accident.”

She looked at Banister again.

“We can beat them,” Doggett breathed. “We’ll have to get Klim away, and __”

“We haven’t a minute to waste,” Sophie said urgently.

As she spoke, the door opened again; she cried out and fell, her eyes filling with dread. Banister saw her fall, knew she had been shot with guns which made no sound. Men ran into the room, and as they came, Banister realised that the only hope lay in those conspirators who had left the room before the raid.

BOOK THREE

THE AGE OF DESTRUCTION

Chapter 21

Palfrey sat in a room at Brierly Place, in London, one of London's gracious houses in a gracious square. The room was large. He sat at a table, with everyone else in the room in front of him. There were nearly a hundred men. Here and there, one stirred; here and there, a match struck or a lighter clicked or a man coughed. Those were the only sounds.

No eye turned away from Palfrey.

He talked, knowing that hardly one of those in the room wanted to believe him; but knowing, also, that most of them did.

Fear was in this room, like icy particles in the air.

He had known fear like it before, but had never known it come so swiftly.

There had been anxiety in the minds of different governments for some weeks, but until the past few days, no one had dreamt of the extent of Anak's threat.

By Palfrey's side sat his wife, Drusilla; a dark-haired woman of great beauty.

Next to her was Andromovitch; and on Palfrey's other side, Bruton.

At the doors; on the stairs; outside in the street, were Z.5 agents, concentrated here for the time being. Men of great importance had come and must be guarded, but the guards knew what the great men did not; there was no positive security; no way of making sure that those who had come to see Palfrey would leave alive; or, if they left safely, would ever reach their Embassies or their Ministries or the Cabinet Room at Number 10.

Palfrey was about to tell them that.

His voice was very quiet, almost gentle. He had told them what he had seen at High Peak; everything that had happened. He sensed the disbelief, but also sensed something stronger. Against their inclinations, against logic and their own intelligence, these men were afraid that he was telling the truth. If they fought against accepting it, that was because they could not see any other way in which they could fight.

They were helpless . . .

Palfrey said in the same quiet voice: "Although Morris-Jones and two other equally brilliant research physicists were working on *fatalis*, and although we had contrived to find samples of the actual substance, a colourless, odourless liquid which appears slightly viscous – sticky – to the touch, none of us knows what *fatalis* is, how it is made, or how we can protect ourselves against it. There is no certainty of protection. The fact that it can be passed on by the dead victims for an hour or more after their death

means that it could spread very quickly. We've seen a dog and a cat used to spread it; we can imagine what would happen if the common house-fly—"

He stopped.

He had the trick of catching his audience at exactly the right moment; of being able to play upon the minds of assembled men. Perhaps it was chance; perhaps he had seen the fly settle on the desk in front of him. He looked at it. It showed up against the white paper. It rubbed its front legs together.

He went on: ". . . were to be infected. It might settle anywhere, on a hand, a head – you know how flies settle. What is worse, if that one were infected, then it would leave *fatalis* on the paper; wherever it landed, there it would leave *fatalis*. Flies have been one of the commonest forms of disease carrier for centuries, but they've never had the chance of carrying anything like this."

The fly flew off the paper.

The men at the front dodged, one man struck at the fly wildly, and another cried out.

"*That* one's all right," Palfrey said.

There was a moment of quiet; the men who had moved looked shamefaced but still frightened. The fly buzzed about Palfrey's head; and then he saw that several others were weaving their haphazard pattern about the alabaster bowl of a pendant light fitting.

"Are you sure it is?" asked Andromovitch.

No one spoke.

The sense of horror crept back.

"If that one were charged with *fatalis* most of us in the room would be dead by now," Palfrey said dryly. "But you're right, Stefan, it's impossible to be absolutely sure. The stuff can come from anywhere, be carried by any animal or insect or human being, and can be deadly even when it's on inanimate objects – a newspaper, for instance, a wall, a packet of cigarettes."

He stopped again; and before he went on, a man said in a hoarse voice: "I do not believe it, I just do not believe this is possible." He jumped up. "You are trying to frighten us!"

"Am I?" asked Palfrey, softly. "I saw some films when I was with Anak. He gave me a complete set." He leaned towards Bruton. "Fix the cine, Corny, will you?"

When the light of the projector went out, Andromovitch and Drusilla Palfrey pulled up the blinds, and daylight fell upon faces of men which seemed to have turned to chalk; upon eyes which had an unusual and an alarming brilliance.

"It's the same all over the world," Palfrey said. "This madman looking down on us can do whatever he likes, and we have no idea how the destruction is caused. It is called *pulveris,* but that's only a name. Nothing like it has yet been found in our own research units anywhere. It has the destructive power of atomic bombs without the burning power and without

the range. It can be rigidly controlled – as if a beam were being projected on to the building which is to be destroyed, much as the beam from the projector fell on the screen."

He paused.

A man muttered: "It's hell on earth," but didn't go on.

Palfrey said: "Up at High Peak, Anak talked about an Age of Destruction. He is the sole judge of what shall be destroyed and what shall be left alone. I have been back ten days. I was told after the seventh day – by letter – that certain towns would be disintegrated next day, to remind me that I must quicken your minds. They were destroyed. Gentlemen, Anak wants a guarantee of co-operation. He wants to be acknowledged at the World Court as Supreme Judge. He wants to tell us exactly what to do – and unless we agree, he'll destroy. We may not yet live in the Age of Destruction, but certainly we live in the days of destruction. I—"

He stopped. He heard a strange sound, behind him, and at the same time saw the horror fastening upon the faces of the men in front of him. He turned.

He saw the walls of the house opposite cracking open, and the rumbling sound came from that. He heard cries and screams from the street, the blare of car horns and the sound of people running.

Great cracks appeared in the wall, as bricks loosened and windows fell in. The cracks grew into gaps. The roof caved in. The chimneys fell. The rumbling sound had become thunder, now; all other sounds were drowned. He saw dust beginning to rise, billowing up, getting thicker and yet thicker, but before it hid the tottering walls from view they had disappeared.

"Now we've got it," Bruton said in his clipped voice; the voice which he used whenever the forces seemed to be too great for him. "Now we know just where we stand, Sap. It couldn't be worse if this were an invasion from another planet."

"What do you think will happen, Sap?" Andromovitch asked.

Palfrey began to toy with a few strands of hair at his forehead. His eyes looked very tired, and the lids drooped. He didn't speak for some time; when he did it was very quietly.

"We'll give in, of course."

Andromovitch stood up and moved towards the window. His great height blocked the view, but he looked at the heap of dust, the ambulances still standing outside, the cordon of police guarding it and moving on the crowds which thronged to see the birth of a new terror.

"Moscow?"

"They'll have to give in," Palfrey said.

"I suppose so."

Bruton jumped up.

"We can't do it. We just can't do it!"

"We'll do it, if it's the only way of saving ourselves for a while, and gaining time," Palfrey said wearily. "Somewhere up in the high mountains

there is Banister and his hopes. It's hardly worth calling a chance now."

"How long did they need?" Andromovitch asked.

"They couldn't say – they couldn't even be sure that they would be able to do anything, no matter how much time they had," said Palfrey. "I've hoped against hope that we'd get a message from them somehow, but " He broke off and shrugged.

The telephone bell rang.

Palfrey was nearest, leaned forward and lifted it.

"Palfrey speaking."

"Dr. Palfrey," a woman said in a pleasant voice, "I think you will find some interesting things happening at the Wentworth Stadium this afternoon. When you've seen it or heard about it, perhaps you will stop wasting time. I shall telephone again for a message for Anak tomorrow."

Palfrey put the telephone down, but held it fast; he looked at the others with new dread.

"Get a car," he said thickly. " 'Silla, you keep out of it. I'll want you here, to pick up messages." He banged the receiver up and down, then dialled Whitehall 1212. "Scotland Yard . . . Assistant Commissioner Chatworth, please . . . Sir Guy, is it possible to empty Wentworth Stadium at once? . . . Yes, I know there are a hundred thousand people there, and I know it's a big match. . . . Listen, Chatworth, there was a village in the Cotswolds . . ."

For the past three hours, all roads had led to Wentworth; tubes, trains, buses, taxis, private cars and cycles had all headed for one of the great matches of the International Soccer season. A hundred thousand fans were all ready to roar for their favourites; were warming up with community singing, until cheers began to go through the serried ranks like waves.

In the great stand which ran all the length of one side of the field, the brilliant emerald patch which was one of the sporting prides of England, there was hardly a vacant seat. There was a constant roar of talk and singing of rattles and of hawkers' cries. There were ten men to every woman, yet there were plenty of women.

Men, women, children . . .

It was ten minutes to three.

The loud-speaker vans outside began to blare. The last throngs were heading for the gates, with their tickets ready, and they heard the loud-speakers but did not heed them. They heard the noise but not the words.

The voices over the loudspeakers were calm enough: "Listen, everybody, this is a special announcement. Due to circumstances beyond our control the match this afternoon has been cancelled. We are extremely sorry to tell you that the ground must be emptied just as quickly as possible. A serious epidemic—"

People began to take notice.

"*What's* that?"

"No game?"

"What the hell do they think they're talking about?"

"Put a sock in it, mate!"

"There'll be a match all right or I'll ruddy well known the reason why."

At last, the message was heard and understood both inside and outside the ground. People were uneasy, indignant, vociferous in protest. They argued. The police wouldn't give the order if it weren't necessary. It was all a lot of nonsense, a scare – probably a trick to let crowds outside the ground find room inside.

"We'd better go."

"Stay tight, we'll be all right."

No one knew where or how the disaster began. Afterwards, a dozen people said that flashes appeared to come from different parts of the ground at the same moment – flashes brighter than the sunlight, brightening up the smiling green of the grass with the corner flags fluttering bravely and the white lines so sharp and clear.

With the flashes, people fell.

There were over a hundred thousand of them, standing so close together that it was impossible for one to move without touching someone else. People staggered and fell – and died. Then as fear and panic spread and they began to rush towards the gates, a new danger quickly turned into a new horror. The people were jammed so tightly together that they could not move. When a flash came, it spread so swiftly among the crowd that it seemed like sheet lightning; and there were no intervals between the flashes.

People slumped down and died; people stood up and died, held erect by the pressure of their neighbours. The cries from the loud-speakers slackened and then died away as the police in the cars looked upon the shambles.

Up on the roof of the stand, on the advertisement hoardings, even on the cross-bars of the goals people crouched and knelt and stared down at the silent masses. These people, alive, dared not move. A solitary loud-speaker sounded, warning them to stay where they were and to make no contact with the dead.

The news spread, then, over the rooftops; no one spoke of it above a whisper, yet it travelled into houses, kitchens, into the ears and hearts of waiting women and children. Tragedy swept over London and its winds blew north, south, east and west.

The angels of death struck at crowds in New York, Chicago and Los Angeles.

Party rallies in Russia and the Communist satellite countries were hushed.

Masses of people in cities all over the world felt the winds of fear, and a strange silence came after them, as if the people realised that this was a horror against which they and their governments had no defence at all. It was as if a threat had come from a different world; as if they were doomed to stand helpless, allowing the unseen, unknown enemy to strike wherever he willed.

Soon, the people turned upon the governments.

"Make peace," they cried, "make peace!"

Chapter 22

Palfrey sat in the large room at Brierly Place, with only Drusilla, his wife, Andromovitch and Bruton. For some time, the telephone had been silent. For some time, they had sat in silence, too, waiting for a word from Anak.

They had heard from those in authority.

The decision to accept the ultimatum had come from smaller governments first, each being prepared to make a separate peace; but gradually the pressure of public will had compelled all governments to agree. The United Nations, meeting for an emergency session, had given a unanimous vote; there were few with the spirit to say, afterwards, that this was the first time in history that such concord had been reached.

Drusilla stirred in her chair; she was watching Palfrey's pale, tired face. On her own was an expression which suggested that she knew she would never see him again. The Russian and the American were also watching him intently; they watched and waited. Once the telephone bell rang, they would turn away from Palfrey. Now—

"Sap," Drusilla said.

"Yes, my sweet?"

"There isn't any guarantee that he'll stop the attacks, is there?"

"No," said Palfrey. "No, I suppose there isn't."

"He probably will," Bruton said abruptly.

"He will for the time being, I think," Palfrey said. "When we've all bowed the knee and he can do what he likes with us, we'll have some idea what he proposes to do. The obvious thing—"

He broke off.

"The caste system among us," said Stefan Andromovitch, in his precise English. "Slaves, workers, executives and ruling classes – a new feudalism. And I suppose out of the ashes there will rise a new democracy. Perhaps the lessons we have had now will be well learned, and those who follow will not quarrel about the meanings of words like freedom and democracy and—"

The telephone bell rang.

Palfrey stiffened; the others looked away from him. The bell rang again. Palfrey stretched out his hand, and lifted the receiver.

"This is Dr. Palfrey speaking."

"Good evening, Dr. Palfrey," said a woman. It was Rita Morrell. "I have a message for you from Anak."

"Yes."

"You are to take the world's surrender to him, at High Peak," the girl said. "You are to walk from your house towards Hyde Park, enter through the main Park Lane gates, walk straight across the road and the riding track, beyond the trees and into the fields. You are to be alone, but you must have the documents of surrender with you. Don't allow anyone to follow you."

Palfrey didn't speak.

"Do you understand?" Rita asked sharply.

"Yes," said Palfrey, very slowly. "Yes, I understand."

"Anak will tell you exactly how he wishes the surrender to be carried out," Rita said.

A few people watched Palfrey as he walked across the grass of Hyde Park. He knew that Drusilla and the two men watched him, but he did not turn round, and they did not cross the road from the gates of the Park. Traffic seemed to be moving at half-speed, and on a subdued note; in fact, few people were about. There was fear of what would happen if they were caught in a crowd and the touch of death came again. Only those who were compelled to journey, or those with great courage, walked the streets.

It was a clear, bright day.

Palfrey heard the sound of the machine coming through the higher atmosphere; the cracking roar; and then the hissing sound. He saw it, suddenly, a mile or more above him. He saw it hovering, before it dropped almost vertically. A few people stared, but no one else was near.

It landed.

"I have come to fetch you in person," Klim said, as he stepped out of the aircraft. He was smiling a little, but there was no humour in him, only a great triumph. "It's just as well you're alone."

Palfrey watched the great peaks standing out above the snow; and saw the valleys and the soft powder; saw the chalet and even the people skiing, children hurling snowballs in mock battles. It was fine there, too, a bright day; it was hard to believe that shadows and clouds existed.

They landed.

A few guards were waiting at the airfield, and walked in Palfrey's wake as he went, with Klim beside him, towards the main doors leading into the fortress city. The doors opened, and swung to and fro as they passed through.

There was no excitement here.

In the false daylight which filled the clean, wide streets, the people walked without excitement or fear. Their faces glowed with health. Nothing suggested that they knew that they were in the middle of a struggle for world conquest. Little groups stood at corners, talking idly; a few walked briskly. All of them broke off whatever they were doing to smile at or salute Klim, who walked on pompously towards the Council Chamber.

To reach this, they had to pass the house where Palfrey knew that Banister had been staying. No one was outside the front doors of that house.

The building which housed the Council Chamber was small, and on one floor; not at all pretentious. Around it were the offices and private rooms; including Anak's study. Guards stood outside; more were on duty inside, where the light was as bright as that in the streets. They looked at Palfrey incuriously. Compared with the rest of them, he seemed weak and pale – as if he were sickening for some mental illness.

They went into the Council Chamber.

Anak, several other men whom Palfrey had never seen before, Rita,

Banister and two other women were sitting round the table.

Palfrey approached Anak.

The door swung to, behind him.

There was silence, as the others watched him. He sensed the gloating which was in Klim and some of the men. He wasn't sure of Rita. He wasn't sure of Banister, either, but there was a great change in Banister.

He looked fit and well – in glowing health; he was like all the others at High Peak. There was satisfaction in his eyes, too. Palfrey found it easy to believe that it was smug satisfaction; that he had swung right over. The thought stabbed at him.

He stood in front of Anak.

"Sit down, Palfrey," Anak said, in the most casual way. "Klim, push up a chair." He paused, then sat down himself. "I understand that there isn't going to be any further opposition."

"There'll be no organised opposition," Palfrey said. "There'll probably be guerrilla resistance."

"Oh, that." Anak shrugged it off. "That does not matter. Very well. I have drawn up a list of instructions. Each nation will scuttle its warships, nothing over two thousand tons is to remain afloat. All military aircraft must be destroyed. Armies, navies and air forces are to be disbanded at once – it will take a little time to disperse them; I have allowed two months. All weapons are to be destroyed – *all* land and air weapons of every kind. Fortifications are to be dismantled everywhere." He paused, and tapped the documents. "It is all in there."

Palfrey said: "Anak, we must keep civil order. We—"

"I shall keep civil law and order," interrupted Anak. "The first thing you will do will be to issue a proclamation simultaneously in all countries, telling the people what has happened."

"The death sentence, to be carried out summarily, will be applied for a variety of offences, such as carrying arms, organising opposition to my World Government, and to theft of any kind whatsoever. The present civil authorities will be responsible for enforcing the law until I make arrangements for them to be superseded. It is all in there," Anak added, impatiently. "Is there anything you want to ask?"

"I am instructed to put certain questions," Palfrey said carefully, "and I am also instructed that unless there is a favourable answer, the governments cannot undertake to maintain order or to guarantee the obedience of the peoples. I—"

Anak said: "What on earth are you talking about? Don't you understand that you simply have to do what you're told?"

"As an emissary," Palfrey asserted, "I have to tell you what I am instructed to tell you. First, we want assurances, in the form of pledges, that you will not use the weapons *fatalis* or *pulveris* anywhere again, or weapons of like destructive quality."

"If you people behave yourselves, there'll be no need," Anak said carelessly. "What else?"

"Have I your assurance?"

Anak said sharply: "You are getting beyond yourself. I shall make no promises, give no undertakings of any kind. Didn't you understand that I wanted unconditional surrender?"

Palfrey kept silent.

Banister and Rita were leaning forward, elbows on the big table, looking at him. They seemed touched with tension; and for that matter, so did the others. Palfrey sensed the gaze of everyone there, and saw the storm gathering in Anak's eyes.

He had been frightened before; he was doubly frightened now.

"Did you understand or didn't you?" demanded Anak.

Palfrey said: "I don't think you quite understand. You're dealing with people – men and women with minds of their own, and people who aren't all afraid of death. Many of them would rather die than live in your kind of world."

"You think so," sneered Anak. "You don't think that I can deal with them?" He gave a sharp, explosive laugh. "I'll show you whether I can! I'll teach anyone, governments or people, to defy me. I'm *ready*, Palfrey, didn't you make that clear?"

Palfrey didn't speak.

Anak leaned forward and pressed a button on the table. Everyone else looked towards the far wall; and Palfrey looked with them.

It slid sideways in two directions, making a door. There was a lighted landing beyond and then steps leading into a vast lighted chamber. One after the other they got up and walked towards the steps. Anak was at Palfrey's side. He saw that Rita and Banister were together, a little way behind him.

Anak went on: "Do you remember what happened at the Wentworth Stadium, Palfrey? I heard about your silly, frantic scramble to try to get the people away. That should have taught you the final lesson – that you can't escape from me. Everything has been too carefully planned. But—Banister set that little business in motion—didn't you, Banister?" There was a sneer in Anak's voice. "I insisted that he should. It was the only way for him to prove how completely he was with me. Wasn't it, Banister?"

Banister said huskily: "Yes, Anak."

"*Fatalis* is, of course, passed from person or thing to another person or thing, and the actual distribution is from sources down below. However, we have to be able to give instructions, and these are done by radio in direct transmission to our agents. Plans for the little demonstration at Wentworth had been in hand for some time – Banister gave the orders by radio for the plans to be put into effect. Didn't you, Banister?"

The sneer was there again.

Banister said huskily: "Yes."

Palfrey sensed something which he couldn't understand; tension which hadn't been here when he had been with Anak before. That took away from any shock he felt; any revulsion against Banister.

“But in spite of that demonstration and others, the people below *still* want to impose terms,” said Anak. “Will they never learn? It is a clear indication of their intellectual dullness – they are *so* dull-witted. I’m sure you find that the case, Palfrey. However, I was half-prepared for it, and I have another demonstration ready.”

Palfrey said sharply: “I am here under a truce—”

“I made no truce,” Anak said brutally. “I delivered an ultimatum.”

They fell silent.

Banister and Rita were some distance away; and Palfrey, used to these things, saw that a group of men had surrounded them. Banister appeared to be walking wherever he wished, quite freely; but in fact he was hemmed in. He looked as if he realised that.

Palfrey could imagine what Banister had felt like when he had issued those orders. He could understand the shock it had given to Banister’s mind and body. It would explain the oddness of his expression, the way he walked; the fear that was in him.

They came into a large room.

This, Palfrey judged, was at least a hundred feet below the level of the Council Chamber itself. It was empty. The walls were smooth. The shape of the room was circular. He looked up – and was reminded of a planetarium, where the wonders of the skies by day and by night, and in all seasons of the year, could be made clear.

There were circular rows of seats also; and in the middle of a raised platform some instrument which looked like a gigantic telescope on a swivel base. Two men stood beside it.

The seats were upholstered and comfortable.

They all sat down, Palfrey next to Anak. He glanced along and saw that Banister was several seats away from him; and that Rita was next to Banister. He saw Banister look towards him; he had never seen greater horror on the face of a man. He sensed vicious disappointment, too – an awful frustration. He guessed that something had gone badly wrong, and he could not understand what; but he could guess.

Banister had laid plans, had plotted as he had promised – but was now fearful of failure.

The great hall was silent when the lights began to fade. Soon, only a glow showed about the great sphere, or globe, which was suspended above their heads.

The world gradually appeared in front of their eyes, a great relief map, moving slowly. There was Australia, New Zealand, the Pacific islands . . . there were the dots which represented the ships . . . there were the cities and the large towns.

It moved round slowly.

There was South America . . .

Mexico, the United States, the Atlantic, Great Britain looking so tiny against Europe, Russia, the Middle East. It was all there; as if they were looking at a huge globe which was turning on its own axis in such a way

that they could see it from every angle.

"You are looking at the world as it would be seen from another planet – from Mars, the Moon, any one you care to name," said Anak. "This is the way that we on this planet look at Mars and the Moon. This particular model is to scale, of course. Also, it is in radio contact with the world itself – you see that?"

A light glowed at Sydney, Australia.

"At the moment," said Anak, "we are in direct radio-beam contact with Sydney – at Sydney Bridge. Do you see that little red knob, Palfrey – little more than a pin-head? . . . That is a lever. If it were pulled, it would light up. Sydney, or that part of it we were beaming, would crumble to dust. Still, I've nothing against Sydney! Some of its slums will have to be cleared eventually, but there is no hurry, and there are plenty of worse places. The slums in the East End of London, for instance – there are a lot of them, aren't there, Palfrey? I am sure that your great humanitarian mind is often sick with grief because of the unfortunates living there. Well, here is your chance to take them out of their squalid surroundings, to ease their life of misery. You see those red lights—"

Tiny red lamps began to glow, round the base of the instrument.

Palfrey said hoarsely: "Yes."

"Good. Go forward. As you draw nearer, you will see that each is labelled. Pull the little lighted lever which says London, and there will be no more East End slums. The radio beam will set off the controlled atmospherical disturbances which will destroy it – *pulverise* it. Go forward, Palfrey. And perhaps after this you will persuade the governments below to stop arguing."

Anak stopped.

Palfrey didn't move.

"Or perhaps you would prefer to destroy part of Chicago or New York or Moscow – perhaps you would gladly cleanse part of someone else's city and not your own. You've a great sentimental regard for the East Enders of London, possibly, but not for those who live on East Side, New York. Very well, find the New York lever. The beam is already poised. Not a single modern building will be touched. Of course a few highly intelligent people might suffer with the rest, but does that really matter?"

He stopped.

Palfrey didn't move.

"Go forward," Anak said, softly.

Palfrey found himself being pulled from his chair by forces which he was powerless to resist.

Chapter 23

Banister could remember what had happened when he had been in a smaller room than this, and when he had sent the order to the world for the release of *fatalis* at the stadium. He, Neil Banister, had actually set that dreadful tragedy in motion.

He felt frozen with the horror of that, even now.

It was useless to tell himself that if he had refused, he would have been pushed aside, someone would have sent the order – or perhaps sent *pulveris* waves spinning towards the earth. He had been a tool used by Anak; used by the Leader to compel him to admit how utterly he was in the power of his captors.

He might have refused.

He had known in advance what he had to do.

"You must do it," he had told himself. "You must do it, you must *prove* how loyal you've become. It will give us a little more time."

He had known that the conspirators who had not been found were working. He knew that Doggett and Sophie had disappeared – and at times dared to hope that they had escaped.

The conspirators had needed time.

So Banister had pulled the lever and given an order. Before he had recovered from the physical and mental revulsion, he had been shown cine pictures of what had happened in the stadium. From that moment on, he had moved about like an automaton. He could not understand how he managed to keep calm; how he avoided losing his head completely, how he kept his hands off Anak.

He dreamed of killing Anak. He dreamed of breaking his neck. He had nightmares of Morris-Jones, trying to kill Anak – and suffered physical torment because he, Neil Banister, had stopped him – had pulled the maddened Professor away.

He had done nothing, because: "*We must have time*."

In the past few days, since the moment when he had given the signal to spread *fatalis,* there had come a new fear.

Even the knowledge that he was being watched everywhere he went had faded. He had almost believed that they had come to trust him, believing that he had been drawn into the conspiracy against his will. In fact, he thought, Rita had pleaded for him. In the back of his mind was the horror of knowing that but for her, he would have suffered much more; would be dead.

Whatever the reason for the easing of the control, the watchers had appeared again, and the television screens had glowed all the time. If he went to bed, and slept, and woke in the darkness of the night, that glow would still be there; he was never free from the watching eyes.

He had heard that Palfrey was coming.

Now, he saw Palfrey getting out of his chair, as if drawn by forces which

were too strong to resist, pulling him towards the lever which could strike disaster on London and on a million of its people.

Palfrey was moving towards the circle of lights; and could now read the names of the cities on them.

He went more slowly.

"Go on, Palfrey," jeered Anak. "It will take only a moment. Just a flash of time. Then you can congratulate yourself – you will have given some of them a chance to live a little longer."

Palfrey didn't speak, but turned to face him. There was just light to show him Anak's face; to glisten on the Leader's eyes.

"Perhaps you'd like some help," jeered Anak. "Banister, say, he's an expert by now. How about it, Banister?"

Banister didn't move.

After a pause, Anak spoke with sudden fury which burst from him viciously, brutally: "You weak-bellied fools! Now you'll do one each – Banister the East End of London, Palfrey New York's East Side. One each, and—"

Banister shouted: "I won't do it! I won't do it again! Palfrey, can't we stop him, can't we—"

Men came towards him; held him; and held Palfrey. The light grew brighter. Faces and figures showed up clearly. Rita was by Anak's side, standing up; and Klim was on her other side. She had never looked more lovely. Banister tried to move towards her, tried to say that he couldn't stand it any more; tried to make her understand that she couldn't allow *this*.

She smiled at him, and at Anak.

Anak put his arm round her shoulders.

"Rita won't help you," he said. "Rita is loyal, aren't you, my sweet?" He hugged her to him. "Did you really hope she would change, Banister?" The sneer was like flame. "Never mind, you'll soon forget that – when I've punished you! You'll forget everything then. So will the rest of the conspirators. You were allowed some freedom to see whether you contacted them. You didn't, but we found them all the same. They were all detained when you came in here this afternoon. Palfrey's arrival was the signal for the arrest."

Banister didn't speak.

The men let him go.

"Press those switches," Anak ordered. "Palfrey – you too."

Neither man moved.

Anak's laboured breathing sounded very loud in the great hall. He strode forward. He slashed Palfrey across the face, and Banister too.

He roared: "Very well, *I'll* do it. But I'll destroy whole cities – watch them go, watch them crumble into dust, *watch them*." He raised his hands over the little levers. "You'll see them light up, you'll see what happens to them." He flung his arms round, his hands touched a dozen levers, and smashed at more, pressing them down, as if the moment had driven him mad. "Watch

them disappear, watch them die!" he roared.

The lighted cities remained as they had been, in clean relief on the great globe. There was no sign of crumbling cities.

Anak's voice, roaring like a lion's, gradually faded. The last note was one of disbelief.

Banister and Palfrey, watching the cities, knew that he had expected to see them disappear. He was astounded, and *alarmed,* because of the stillness.

He struck at more levers.

The same thing happened.

He said in a strange voice: "What does this mean? What has happened?"

"It means that I could not stand by and see you destroy the world," Rita said, very softly, very clearly. "I have seen you going more and more mad. I could not go on with this. So, I helped the conspirators. I freed Doggett and Sophie – that is how they escaped. They are busy, now – they've cut off the beams, Anak, but they're going to destroy—"

She broke off.

Everyone present knew that this was the final truth. It showed in Anak's face, and in Klim's. It was like a sentence of death.

Banister felt a great exaltation.

Television screens, dark until that moment, began to glow all round the walls.

No one but Rita spoke in this hall.

Doggett's face appeared.

"Rita, get away if you can. Use escape shaft two – we've cut the *pulveris* beam off the lower world, it's now on High Peak and we can't stop it. It's on the other cities, too – hear that, Anak, everything you've built is being destroyed, everything. Rita—Rita, try—"

The glow faded, abruptly.

There was darkness.

There came a deep rumbling sound.

Palfrey and Banister saw and heard everything that went on, without fully understanding it. Banister had one clear picture; of Rita. Life and death were trivial things compared with the knowledge of what she had done.

He heard her voice.

"Take Palfrey – go to the door marked four. Hurry along the tunnel beyond it. I'll stop—"

A man leapt at her, and touched her; and there was a flash of light. The man fell. In that flash Palfrey and Banister saw the faces of the other men, the incredulous dismay on Anak's. In that flash they saw other men leap at Rita, but she had only to spread out her arms and touch them.

"Go to the door!" she cried.

They ran towards it. Banister looked behind him, and saw that she was backing towards it. Only Anak and Klim were alive, and they were following her. Yet they did not move quickly. Banister saw Anak put his hand to his pocket, and saw him draw a knife.

"*Rita!*"

The floor of the great chamber was trembling. Banister, in the doorway, felt it, felt himself shaking as if he were in the centre of a great earthquake. There was the thunderous rumbling of the splitting earth and the breaking walls of the chamber.

A great gap appeared at Anak's feet.

Before he could throw the knife, it swallowed him up. Klim disappeared into it, and the great machine vanished. The earth shook and the walls began to crumble. The walls broke.

Rita was running towards Banister.

The door stood open; Palfrey was holding it. Ahead lay a lighted tunnel, so far untouched.

"*Run, run, run!*" screamed Rita.

As they ran, the walls and the floor shook, and the noise of the vanishing mountain stronghold was in their ears every moment, as if giants were roaring and deafening them. Lights went out, one by one. They could hardly see, they could only hear – it sounded as if the world itself were chasing them.

Behind them, the floor crumbled away.

They ran with wild speed, unseeing, drawn by distant lights, until suddenly a blast of icy wind came towards them. Beyond, they could see the pale light of evening. They passed through a doorway which should have been locked and bolted, and was made of steel. They stumbled out into the snow. As they fell, one against the other, the mountain itself shook and quivered. Snow was tossed up into the air and fell again, like a gigantic waterfall.

Out here, the noise was more terrifying still.

Explosions split the mountain. Beneath the gentle light of the evening sky, huge craters appeared. One mountain peak, its summit so high that it looked as if it were touching the stars, began to fall.

It toppled . . .

The topmost peak vanished into the crater that the disappearance of the mountain made.

The three people on the mountain-side felt the awful coldness of the wind and the snow; but watched the gaunt gigantic shapes disappear. The whole skyline changed.

As they had watched, the longer shadows of the night had fallen upon them, and now it was dark but for the brilliance of the stars. Dust rose in mighty clouds, but the wind drove it away, and to the north there was the clear sky and those stars.

They began to walk, Rita between the two men; and each felt perished, each knew that the cold was so great that there was little hope of survival, even if they could walk across the new-flung rocks without vanishing into the frozen bowels of the earth.

Then they saw a light.

They heard nothing, but they saw more lights.

They saw men.

One man came towards them, bringing his lantern. He was so close that they could see him opening his mouth, but could not hear anything that he said. Soon, he was with them. It was Doggett.

He took Rita and carried her over his shoulder, and led the way. In a few minutes they were in the warmth of a cave, sheltered from the wind and the snow; and there was real warm food, the promise of life – even if it were only the life they could lead in these mountains.

"We've two 'planes – Project Ninety-seven – that we think will work," said Doggett. "Enough for taking us all away. Nine survivors. All that's left of High Peak. Couldn't salvage anything. Can't get samples of *fatalis* or the details of *pulveris,* can't—"

"We're going to get away!" Banister shouted.

"We're going to escape!" Palfrey cried.

Rita sprang to her feet, jumping, shouting, waving her hands wildly, laughing, crying.

"I didn't think we'd do it," she gasped wildly. "I didn't think we should." She flung herself into Banister's arms, kissed him fiercely, wildly. "I thought we'd die. I thought we'd fail. It's been worth it, worth it, worth it!" She ran from Banister and seized Palfrey, kissed him, flung herself into his arms, laughing, crying, screaming the same words, and of them all, the clearest were: "It's been worth it, worth it, worth it!"

Chapter 24

Banister walked slowly towards his flat in Wickham Mews, past the spot where Monk-Gilbert had died; and where he had first come in contact with the attempt to dominate the world. It was a month since he had returned to London, but nothing was really clear, he could not think as he had once been able to. He would walk along a crowded London street or sit in a taxi or go rumbling through the Underground; and he would see and hear the collapse of ice-capped mountains.

It would be warm sunshine, and he would feel the icy touch of snow.

A soft, warm wind would blow, and brush his cheeks with a blast so cold that he would shiver.

But the moments were getting less frequent; there were more times, when he could think and behave normally – even when he could talk about what had happened rationally, without suddenly breaking down; or trembling, or collapsing. Those who had asked the questions had been very gentle – and even more gentle with Rita, who was only now beginning to recover. At times Banister wondered if she would ever be sane again.

She was in a nursing home, and he had just been to see her. He did not yet know how she had come to serve Anak, or just when she had rebelled.

It was daylight, but it seemed dark – as it had been on that night when he had left his flat and noticed that a lamp was out, and then kicked against a dead body, heard a scream and seen a blinding light.

There was a light at the window of his flat. That didn't surprise him, because Palfrey had a key – so had Andromovitch. They had developed a habit of gathering there instead of at Brierly Place, where there were always crowds and where the telephone was never silent.

Doggett was staying here, too.

The others who had escaped, including the young American, were back in the homes which they had left before they had gone to the Higher World.

Palfrey, Andromovitch, Bruton and Banister, with help from Doggett and a little from Rita, had been preparing a summary of the history of High Peak and the Higher World. They now knew, beyond any doubt, that the other mountain cities had also been destroyed. Among the men of the Resistance had been one who had been able to turn the beam on all of the citadels; and although he had not expected to escape, he had acted – a moment before Anak, in his wild fury, had been ready to crumble half the world.

Banister walked up the little flight of stone steps, and let himself in.

He heard Palfrey's voice, and Andromovitch's; then the unmistakable voice of Bruton. He didn't go straight into the front room. This was one of his bad moments, and he wanted to get over it. So he went into the bedroom and sat on the side of the bed.

Apart from the two aircraft, Project 97, which Mick had completed just before his death, they had salvaged very little. Doggett had brought away certain documents and formulae, which would help them to trace the source

of *fatalis,* and perhaps in some unforeseeable day in the future create radio beams as powerful as *pulveris.* There were supplies of *fatalis* hidden somewhere "down here", but no prospect of finding them. It could not be stored indefinitely; in a few months stocks would lose their deadliness.

The men had also brought away all the bearings needed to place the other mountain cities – seven in all, as well as nine stations, inhabited by a few dozen people, and used for relaying beams, sending messages and refuelling transport aircraft.

All the aircraft had flown considerably above the highest level known to normal aeronautical research workers.

There were several hundred agents in the world, some of them known by name, some unknown. As far as Doggett and Rita knew, none of these had had any great scientific knowledge, and they were not likely to constitute any threat in the future. Some might have a supply of *fatalis,* and might be dangerous for a while; but on their own they were more likely to hide, hoping to escape discovery.

Banister stood up slowly, lit a cigarette and went across to the other room.

He tapped, and Bruton opened the door.

The three Z.5 men and Doggett were together, the room was a blue haze of smoke, and there was a smell of beer. Several bottles, most of them open, stood on a small table. The large table was a mass of diagrams. Palfrey sat at it, his silky hair ruffled, a cigarette drooping from the corner of his lips, a vacant expression in his eyes.

Andromovitch, quite large enough to make two of them, sprawled on a couch beneath the window. Doggett and Bruton took upright chairs, leaving the one armchair for Banister to drop into.

Andromovitch stretched out his long arms, picked up a bottle of beer, opened it and handed it with a glass to Banister.

Already, Banister felt better. There was a remarkable normality about these men. Whatever they did, they were human beings. They had the gift, Banister realised, of restoring one's faith; he wasn't sure what the faith was in.

"Hallo, Neil," Palfrey said. "How is Rita?"

"I think she's better."

"Splendid. We've just been saying again that without her, we shouldn't have had a chance. If it comes to that, you—"

Banister said: "Forget it, can't you?"

Palfrey began to play with a few strands of hair.

"That's the trouble," he said. "People will. Remind them that they were within an ace of being pulverised, and people look blank or they suggest that it was an exaggeration. *Fatalis?* Yes, *strange*, wasn't it – that affair at Wentworth Stadium especially. There are times," went on Palfrey with gentle emphasis, "when I despair of my fellow humans."

"Especially me," murmured Andromovitch.

"Especially those I know well," agreed Palfrey, still playing with his hair.

“Look at the number of times we’ve been on the verge of disaster and have escaped by the skin of our teeth. It’ll never happen again, the statesmen cry, and in a few years, it does happen again. At first, Anak simply discovered a way to add oxygen to the rarefied air of great mountains. People could live quite normally at very low temperatures. In fact, the people need ‘conditioning’ – you felt bad when you first reached High Peak, but soon got used to it, didn’t you?”

Banister said: “Yes.”

“You see what I mean,” said Palfrey plaintively. “It didn’t even occur to him to marvel at the fact that people could ski and generally have fun in the Antarctic. He just took it for granted when it was happening!”

“I apologise,” said Banister, humbly. His eyes sparkled, he felt much better than when he had come in.

“Once Anak was able to do that, much was fairly easy,” Palfrey went on. “He got his men away – and soon took women to them, even a would-be Dictator of the world knows that you can’t keep ‘em apart for long! Then with modern methods adapted to a far greater degree than we’ve seen before, he built the cities within the mountains, grew food, did everything necessary. From America he got the latest designs in ventilation and artificial daylight. Then he had machine parts and machines shipped to small islands and transported by larger aircraft up to High Peak and the other strongholds, before having his own factories built and made ready. It took him many years. The one bitter lesson I’ve learned is that he did it successfully. No one knew, no one guessed. Promising young scientists and research workers, chemists and doctors, all left one country or another ostensibly to take up residence in another; they disappeared. It was all very cleverly done, but it shouldn’t have been possible.”

Palfrey paused.

They were all sitting up now, waiting on his words.

“After a while, he found that he could manufacture everything he wanted there, but he had problems of labour, materials and research workers. We know that he recruited his slave labour from people who couldn’t or wouldn’t go on working for him. He found a lot of raw materials in the mountains, but he bought more on world markets – grim evidence that sellers of the raw materials of death still don’t care who they sell to, provided they get the money.”

No one interrupted.

The tone of Palfrey’s voice changed; became almost savage.

“One day perhaps the idiots who control our destinies will realise that there *must* be international control of scientific discoveries – that we can’t let nations or groups of nations or of people exploit them by themselves. Now it’s all over, what’s happening? Fake Peace Conferences. Lie upon lie upon lie tossed about. It’s beginning all over again. Just for a few weeks, under the danger, we all forgot our differences. Now there’s no more danger, so we can afford to cut each other’s throats. Well, we’ve got it all here. How it started, where it went to, who was affected, who Anak was—”

Banister stirred.

"Who was he?"

"The natural son of a Finnish woman and an Englishman," he said. "His father did a lot of work in the north of Finland, and made this discovery of how to live normally in conditions of extreme cold. It began from that. Anak's father discovered gold in places not yet properly surveyed. After the father's death, Anak unloaded his fortune slowly on to the world market – and the market let him. Then he proved to have financial genius, and followed that by finding precious metals in various places. That's how he came across *fatalis* in certain low-content uranium ore, not worth working for the usual reasons. He developed it with the help of brilliant scientists who shared his ideas. That's how it all built up.

"Klim and the other leaders were with him from the beginning. The odd, the frightening thing," went on Palfrey, "is that they appear to have started out as genuine idealists, wanting to see one world run on democratic lines. Gradually the power bug got into their systems; they let it corrupt them. Once that happened—" He shrugged, and tapped the report in front of him. "This is for Goverments to study, then for special committees, and the United Nations – then for the archives – then for the limbo of forgotten things. Like all the rest."

He smiled at Banister.

"That too cynical for you, Neil?"

"No," said Banister, slowly. "No, not really. I can imagine how you feel. There's one thing you may not think amounts to much, but—"

Palfrey smiled.

"Rita, yes—Monk-Gilbert's niece. She was first approached because her uncle was a uranium man. She joined the Anak gang. Monk-Gilbert didn't know she was spying on him. Officially she worked for a mysterious – non-existent – Mr. Menzies, so that she could say she was going with him whenever she was out of the country.

"It's now known that Monk-Gilbert discovered she had stolen some of his secrets. He wanted to see her, to challenge her. She wasn't home. He thought she was still engaged to you, and was going to see you. Anak and Klim were told. They didn't know what we'd discovered, and didn't want Monk-Gilbert to give any details away, so he was attacked.

"In fact, he'd discovered *fatalis*, but hated the idea of passing on all knowledge about it. He wanted to keep it secret, wouldn't give me or anyone else full details. But he would have, if he'd been sure that Rita had passed it on to anyone else. So, he had to be killed. His murderers smashed his skull, hoping to hide the fact that he'd died from *fatalis*. You know what happened then." Palfrey paused, then added slowly: "Whatever Rita did, she made up for it."

Banister felt a sense of deep humility.

"She'll be perfectly all right, too," Palfrey told him. "I've the word of the best doctors in Europe. You'll both be all right. You're the only two people in the world who are entitled to forget, and there are moments when I think

you'll be the only two who'll remember." He paused. "Neil, Anak had an almost hypnotic control of Rita. He often exerted it. She knew that. The fact that she resisted at all is one of the miracles. Now, she needs all the help you can give her."

"She'll get it," Banister said.

The day came when the pallor faded from Rita's lips, when her eyes were calm and free from fear, and when, with Banister, she could walk and talk and be natural.

"I forget most of the time," she said one day as they walked from the flat. "The worst things were—"

"Don't harass yourself," Banister said quickly.

"It's better to talk," Rita said. "Finding that you were right and fooling Klim and Anak. I even betrayed Mick! Neil, I had to, because the guards knew what had happened. I knew they would report automatically, and Klim and Anak would have wondered why I kept silent. Once I'd decided, I *had* to keep up the pretence. Sometimes—I doubted if I were right, whether I could help to destroy all they had built up. I was right, Neil, wasn't I? Tell me I was right."

Banister said gruffly: "Of course you were."

They walked on, quietly.

Endnote

[1] See The Children of Hate.

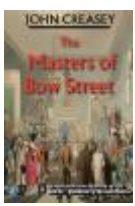
Series Information

Published or to be published by
House of Stratus

Dates given are those of first publication
Alternative titles in brackets

'The Baron' (47 titles) (writing as Anthony Morton)
'Department 'Z'' (28 titles)
'Dr. Palfrey Novels' (34 titles)
'Gideon of Scotland Yard' (22 titles)
'Inspector West' (43 titles)
'Sexton Blake' (5 titles)
'The Toff' (59 titles)

along with:



The Masters of Bow Street

This epic novel embraces the story of the Bow Street Runners and the Marine Police, forerunners of the modern police force, who were founded by novelist Henry Fielding in 1748. They were the earliest detective force operating from the courts to enforce the decisions of magistrates. John Creasey's account also gives a fascinating insight into family life of the time and the struggle between crime and justice, and ends with the establishment of the Metropolitan Police after the passing of Peel's Act in 1829.

'The Baron' Series

These Titles can be read as a series, or randomly as standalone novels

1. Meet the Baron *(The Man in the Blue Mask) (1937)*

2. The Baron Returns *(The Return of the Blue Mask) (1937)*
3. The Baron Again *(Salute Blue Mask) (1938)*
4. The Baron at Bay *(Blue Mask at Bay) (1938)*
5. Alias the Baron *(Alias Blue Mask) (1939)*
6. The Baron at Large *(Challenge Blue Mask!) (1939)*
7. Versus the Baron *(Blue Mask Strikes Again) (1940)*
8. Call for the Baron *(Blue Mask Victorious) (1940)*
9. The Baron Comes Back *(1943)*
10. A Case for the Baron *(1945)*
11. Reward for the Baron *(1945)*
12. Career for the Baron *(1946)*
13. Blood Diamond *(The Baron and the Beggar) (1947)*
14. Blame the Baron *(1948)*
15. A Rope for the Baron *(1948)*
16. Books for the Baron *(1949)*
17. Cry for the Baron *(1950)*
18. Trap the Baron *(1950)*
19. Attack the Baron *(1951)*
20. Shadow the Baron *(1951)*
21. Warn the Baron *(1952)*
22. The Baron Goes East *(1953)*
23. The Baron in France *(1953)*
24. Danger for the Baron *(1953)*
25. The Baron Goes Fast *(1954)*
26. Nest-Egg for the Baron *(Deaf, Dumb and Blonde) (1954)*
27. Help from the Baron *(1955)*
28. Hide the Baron *(1956)*
29. The Double Frame *(Frame the Baron) (1957)*
30. Blood Red *(Red Eye for the Baron) (1958)*
31. If Anything Happens to Hester *(Black for the Baron) (1959)*
32. Salute for the Baron *(1960)*
33. The Baron Branches Out *(A Branch for the Baron) (1961)*
34. The Baron and the Stolen Legacy *(Bad for the Baron) (1962)*
35. A Sword for the Baron *(The Baron and the Mogul Swords) (1963)*
36. The Baron on Board *(The Mask of Sumi) (1964)*
37. The Baron and the Chinese Puzzle *(1964)*
38. Sport for the Baron *(1966)*
39. Affair for the Baron *(1967)*
40. The Baron and the Missing Old Masters *(1968)*
41. The Baron and the Unfinished Portrait *(1969)*
42. Last Laugh for the Baron *(1970)*
43. The Baron Goes A-Buying *(1971)*
44. The Baron and the Arrogant Artist *(1972)*
45. Burgle the Baron *(1973)*
46. The Baron - King Maker *(1975)*
47. Love for the Baron *(1979)*

'Department Z' Novels

These Titles can be read as a series, or randomly as standalone novels

1. The Death Miser *(1932)*
2. Redhead *(1934)*
3. First Came a Murder *(1934)*
4. Death Round the Corner *(1935)*
5. The Mark of the Crescent *(1935)*
6. Thunder in Europe *(1936)*
7. The Terror Trap *(1936)*
8. Carriers of Death *(1937)*
9. Days of Danger *(1937)*
10. Death Stands By *(1938)*
11. Menace! *(1938)*
12. Murder Must Wait *(1939)*
13. Panic! *(1939)*
14. Death by Night *(1940)*
15. The Island of Peril *(1940)*
16. Sabotage *(1941)*
17. Go Away Death *(1941)*
18. The Day of Disaster *(1942)*
19. Prepare for Action *(1942)*
20. No Darker Crime *(1943)*
21. Dark Peril *(1944)*
22. The Peril Ahead *(1946)*
23. The League of Dark Men *(1947)*
24. The Department of Death *(1949)*
25. The Enemy Within *(1950)*
26. Dead or Alive *(1951)*
27. A Kind of Prisoner *(1954)*
28. The Black Spiders *(1957)*

Doctor Palfrey Novels

These Titles can be read as a series, or randomly as standalone novels

1. Traitor's Doom *(1942)*
2. The Legion of the Lost *(1943)*
3. The Valley of Fear *(The Perilous Country) (1943)*
4. Dangerous Quest *(1944)*
5. Death in the Rising Sun *(1945)*

6. The Hounds of Vengeance *(1945)*
7. Shadow of Doom *(1946)*
8. The House of the Bears *(1946)*
9. Dark Harvest *(1947)*
10. The Wings of Peace *(1948)*
11. The Sons of Satan *(1948)*
12. The Dawn of Darkness *(1949)*
13. The League of Light *(1949)*
14. The Man Who Shook the World *(1950)*
15. The Prophet of Fire *(1951)*
16. The Children of Hate *(The Killers of Innocence; The Children of Despair) (1952)*
17. The Touch of Death *(1954)*
18. The Mists of Fear *(1955)*
19. The Flood *(1956)*
20. The Plague of Silence *(1958)*
21. Dry Spell *(The Drought) (1959)*
22. The Terror *(1962)*
23. The Depths *(1963)*
24. The Sleep *(1964)*
25. The Inferno *(1965)*
26. The Famine *(1967)*
27. The Blight *(1968)*
28. The Oasis *(1970)*
29. The Smog *(1970)*
30. The Unbegotten *(1971)*
31. The Insulators *(1972)*
32. The Voiceless Ones *(1973)*
33. The Thunder-Maker *(1976)*
34. The Whirlwind *(1979)*

Gideon Series

(Writing as JJ Marric)

These Titles can be read as a series, or randomly as standalone novels

1. Gideon's Day *(Gideon of Scotland Yard) (1955)*
2. Seven Days to Death *(Gideon's Week) (1956)*
3. Gideon's Night *(1957)*
4. A Backwards Jump *(Gideon's Month) (1958)*
5. Thugs and Economies *(Gideon's Staff) (1959)*
6. Gideon Combats Influence *(Gideon's Risk) (1960)*
7. Gideon's Fire *(1961)*

8. A Conference for Assassins *(Gideon's March) (1962)*
9. Travelling Crimes *(Gideon's Ride) (1963)*
10. An Uncivilised Election *(Gideon's Vote) (1964)*
11. Criminal Imports *(Gideon's Lot) (1965)*
12. To Nail a Serial Killer *(Gideon's Badge) (1966)*
13. From Murder to a Cathedral *(Gideon's Wrath) (1967)*
14. Gideon's River *(1968)*
15. Darkness and Confusion *(Gideon's Power) (1969)*
16. Sport, Heat & Scotland Yard *(Gideon's Sport) (1970)*
17. Gideon's Art *(1971)*
18. No Relaxation at Scotland Yard *(Gideon's Men) (1972)*
19. Impartiality Against the Mob *(Gideon's Press) (1973)*
20. Not Hidden by the Fog *(Gideon's Fog) (1975)*
21. Good and Justice *(Gideon's Drive) (1976)*
22. Vigilantes & Biscuits *(Gideon's Force) (1978)*

Inspector West Series

These Titles can be read as a series, or randomly as standalone novels

1. Inspector West Takes Charge *(1942)*
2. Go Away to Murder *(Inspector West Leaves Town) (1943)*
3. An Apostle of Gloom *(Inspector West At Home) (1944)*
4. Inspector West Regrets *(1945)*
5. Holiday for Inspector West *(1946)*
6. Battle for Inspector West *(1948)*
7. The Case Against Paul Raeburn *(Triumph for Inspector West) (1948)*
8. Inspector West Kicks Off *(Sport for Inspector West) (1949)*
9. Inspector West Alone *(1950)*
10. Inspector West Cries Wolf *(The Creepers) (1950)*
11. The Figure in the Dusk *(A Case for Inspector West) (1951)*
12. The Dissemblers *(Puzzle for Inspector West) (1951)*
13. The Case of the Acid Throwers *(The Blind Spot; Inspector West at Bay) (1952)*
14. Give a Man a Gun *(A Gun for Inspector West) (1953)*
15. Send Inspector West *(1953)*
16. So Young, So Cold, So Fair *(A Beauty for Inspector West; The Beauty Queen Killer) (1954)*
17. Murder Makes Haste *(Inspector West Makes Haste; The Gelignite Gang; Night of the Watchman) (1955)*
18. Murder: One, Two, Three *(Two for Inspector West) (1955)*
19. Death of a Postman *(Parcels for Inspector West) (1956)*
20. Death of an Assassin *(A Prince for Inspector West) (1956)*
21. Hit and Run *(Accident for Inspector West) (1957)*

22. The Trouble at Saxby's *(Find Inspector West; Doorway to Death) (1957)*
23. Murder, London - New York *(1958)*
24. Strike for Death *(The Killing Strike) (1958)*
25. Death of a Racehorse *(1959)*
26. The Case of the Innocent Victims *(1959)*
27. Murder on the Line *(1960)*
28. Death in Cold Print *(1961)*
29. The Scene of the Crime *(1961)*
30. Policeman's Dread *(1962)*
31. Hang the Little Man *(1963)*
32. Look Three Ways at Murder *(1964)*
33. Murder, London - Australia *(1965)*
34. Murder, London - South Africa *(1966)*
35. The Executioners *(1967)*
36. So Young to Burn *(1968)*
37. Murder, London - Miami *(1969)*
38. A Part for a Policeman *(1970)*
39. Alibi for Inspector West *(1971)*
40. A Splinter of Glass *(1972)*
41. The Theft of Magna Carta *(1973)*
42. The Extortioners *(1974)*
43. A Sharp Rise in Crime *(1978)*

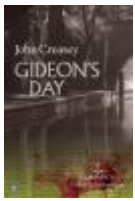
'The Toff' Series

These Titles can be read as a series, or randomly as standalone novels

1. Introducing the Toff *(It's the Toff!) (1938)*
2. The Toff Goes On *(1939)*
3. The Toff Steps Out *(1939)*
4. Here Comes the Toff *(1940)*
5. The Toff Breaks In *(1940)*
6. Salute the Toff *(1941)*
7. The Toff Proceeds *(1941)*
8. The Toff Goes to Market *(1942)*
9. The Toff Is Back *(1942)*
10. The Toff on the Trail *(short stories) (1942)*
11. The Toff among the Millions *(1943)*
12. Accuse the Toff *(1943)*
13. The Toff and the Deadly Priest *(The Toff and the Curate) (1944)*
14. The Toff and the Great Illusion *(1944)*
15. Feathers for the Toff *(1945)*
16. The Toff and the Lady *(1946)*

17. Poison for the Toff *(The Toff on Ice) (1946)*
18. Hammer the Toff *(1947)*
19. The Toff in Town *(1948)*
20. The Toff Takes Shares *(1948)*
21. The Toff and Old Harry *(1949)*
22. The Toff on Board *(1949)*
23. Fool the Toff *(1950)*
24. Kill the Toff *(1950)*
25. A Knife for the Toff *(1951)*
26. A Mask for the Toff *(The Toff Goes Gay) (1951)*
27. Hunt the Toff *(1952)*
28. Call the Toff *(1953)*
29. The Toff Down Under *(Break the Toff) (1953)*
30. Murder Out of the Past *(short stories) (1953)*
31. The Toff at Camp *(The Toff at Butlins) (1954)*
32. The Toff at the Fair *(1954)*
33. A Six for the Toff *(A Score for the Toff) (1955)*
34. The Toff and the Deep Blue Sea *(1955)*
35. Kiss the Toff *(Make-Up for the Toff) (1956)*
36. The Toff in New York *(1956)*
37. Model for the Toff *(1957)*
38. The Toff on Fire *(1957)*
39. The Toff and the Stolen Tresses *(1958)*
40. Terror for the Toff *(The Toff on the Farm) (1958)*
41. Double for the Toff *(1959)*
42. The Toff and the Runaway Bride *(1959)*
43. A Rocket for the Toff *(1960)*
44. The Toff and the Kidnapped *(The Kidnapped Child) (1960)*
45. Follow the Toff *(1961)*
46. The Toff and the Toughs *(The Toff and the Teds) (1961)*
47. A Doll for the Toff *(1963)*
48. Leave It to the Toff *(1963)*
49. The Toff and the Spider *(1965)*
50. The Toff in Wax *(1966)*
51. A Bundle for the Toff *(1967)*
52. Stars for the Toff *(1968)*
53. The Toff and the Golden Boy *(1969)*
54. The Toff and the Fallen Angels *(1970)*
55. Vote for the Toff *(1971)*
56. The Toff and the Trip-Trip-Triplets *(1972)*
57. The Toff and the Terrified Taxman *(1973)*
58. The Toff and the Sleepy Cowboy *(1975)*
59. The Toff and the Crooked Copper *(1977)*

Select Synopses

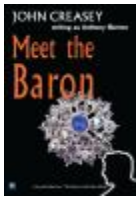


Gideon's Day
Gideon's day is a busy one. He balances family commitments with solving a series of seemingly unrelated crimes from which a plot nonetheless evolves and a mystery is solved. One of the most senior officers within Scotland Yard, George Gideon's crime solving abilities are in the finest traditions of London's world famous police headquarters. His analytical brain and sense of fairness is respected by colleagues and villains alike.

Gideon's Night
On this particular night Commander George Gideon has to deal with a couple of psychopaths who trail pain and blood in their wake. One targets infants, and the other young women on London's foggy streets. There's also an explosive gang war in the offing, and one way or another all of these cases are coming to their breathtaking conclusions at the same time. Can Scotland Yard's finest cope with such a nightmarish scenario, with what would ordinarily be months of time consuming police work crammed into just one night?

Gideon's Fire
Commander George Gideon of Scotland Yard has to deal successively with news of a mass murderer, a depraved maniac, and the deaths of a family in an arson attack on an old building south of the river. This leaves little time for the crisis developing at home . . .

Meet the Baron
John Mannering (*The Baron*) makes

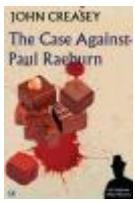


his first appearance in this volume. Lord Fauntley cannot help showing off both his daughter and the security under which his precious jewels are kept. Mannering finds himself attracted to both .... Money is tight and so he plans a burglary, but this fails and unexpected consequnces result. The relationship with Lorna Fauntley flourishes, and a series of high profile thefts and adventures ensure Mannering's future, so he believes, until Lorna equates him with *The Baron*. One of the many further twists in this award winning novel occurs when the police appear to seek Mannering's help, only to have everything turned upside down as the plot develops . . .

Shadow The Baron
John Mannering ('*The Baron*') is called in by Scorland Yard's Superintendent Bristow to help catch the mysterious jewel thief '*The Shadow*'. No one know the thief's identity, but he has managed to pull off many high profile robberies. However, as Mannering proceeds to track down the target, he finds the pursuer becomes the pursued . . . ..

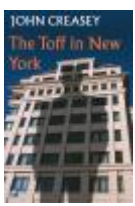
The House of the Bears
Standing alone in the bleak Yorkshire Moors is Sir Rufus Marne's *'House of the Bears'*. Dr. Palfrey is asked to journey there to examine an invalid - whom he finds has disappeared. Moreover, Marne's daughter lies terribly injured after a fall from the minstrel's gallery, which Dr. Palfrey discovers was no accident. He sets out to look into both matters, but the discoveries he makes are truly fantastic. A deserted mine, powerful explosive and a submarine all feature in this powerful mystery. The results are even capable of surprising him ...

Inspector West Takes Charge
Extortion is the name of the game, as one victim after another is ruthlessly targeted. Chief Inspector Roger West must now solve the problem, along with a tangle of murders - but the case becomes more frightening as every minute passes.



The Case Against Paul Raeburn
Chief Inspector Roger West has been watching and waiting for over two years - he is determined to catch Paul Raeburn out. The millionaire racketeer may have made a mistake, following the killing of a small time crook. Can the ace detective triumph over the evil Raeburn in what are very difficult circumstances? This cannot be assumed as not eveything, it would seem, is as simple as it first appears .....

Introducing The Toff
The Toff is the Hon. Richard Rollison; the ultimate sleuth who revels in solving crimes. Whilst returning home across the Essex countryside from a day's cricket at his father's Norfolk home, he happens upon an accident that sets him on a new trail. This involves murder, suspense and thrilling action as The Toff applies his mind with its usual precision and thoroughness.



The Toff in New York
'Say, Miss Hall, I hope that brother of yours hasn't run into any trouble.' But Will Hall had been kidnapped and the Honourable Richard Rollison, known by many by the apt if absurd soubriquet of the *'Toff'* is soon on the scene, but not before a murdered man had fallen into Valerie Hallís arms. There's lots of action in 'millionaire surroundings', with a rich private eye

and the NYPD all on the case, whilst the Toff tracks Dutch Himmy, surely the worst man in New York . . . ..

www.houseofstratus.com